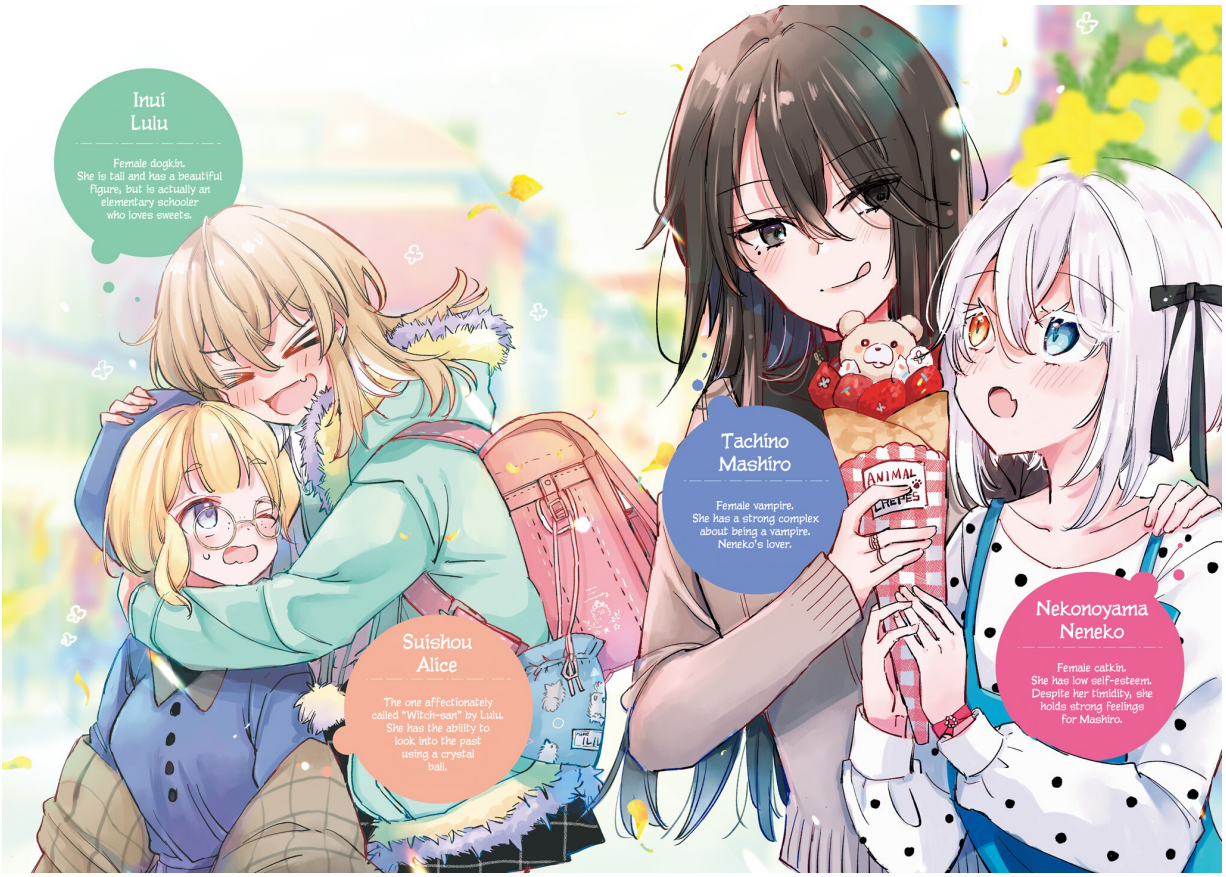
猫ノ山寧々子はネコになる
Nekonoyama neneko wa nekoninaru
著——ひのはら
hinohara/mito
イラスト——ミト

Illustrations

"You're cute."
"...!"


Inuí Lulu
Female dogkin.
She is tall and has a beautiful figure, but is actually an elementary schooler who loves sweets.
Suishou Alice
The one affectionately called "Witch-san" by Lulu. She has the ability to look into the past using a crystal ball.
Tachino Mashiro
Female vampire.
She has a strong complex about being a vampire.
Neneko's lover.
ANIMAL CREPES
Nekonoyama Neneko
Female catkin.
She has low self-esteem. Despite her timidity, she holds strong feelings for Mashiro.

"Please allow me to indulge you plenty until you feel reassured, Mashiro-san... Because I accept all of you."

Chapter 1 - Admiration and Yearning

They look just like humans but obtain sustenance from the blood of living beings.

Aside from requiring the blood of others to survive, they have no major differences from humans.

Majestic beings who seem so human-like, yet are not humans.

They are vampires.

However, their total numbers do not reach even 1% of the population.

That is because centuries ago, humans massacred them out of fear of their ever-increasing numbers.

One could be considered lucky to meet a vampire in their daily life. It is almost like they have become creatures from fairytales.

From the window of her room, Neneko vacantly watches the students returning home from school.

Right now, it's 4:00 p.m. The students walking and chatting happily amongst each other are all around the same age as Neneko.

Looking at the unfamiliar high school girls who seem to have a sparkling aura in their uniforms makes Neneko dejected as it makes the difference between herself and them all the more clear.

As if to avert her eyes from reality, Neneko shifts her gaze from her window to her tablet.

"I can't concentrate..."

Unable to focus, the teacher's voice coming from her earphones just enters one ear and exits the other.

Unlike a conventional high schooler, Neneko takes all her classes online so there's no need to rush to earn credits.

The tension leaves her body as she rests her head on the desk. She hears a scratching sound and lifts her head.

As she expected, she finds a stray calico cat on the balcony scratching against the window.

"What's the matter?"

Neneko opens the window a bit and the cat slips in through the gap.

The calico cat lowers her head slightly as if bowing.

"My children were born the other day, so I came here to inform you."
"Oh, is that so? Congratulations!"
"Thank you."

The calico cat goes on to say that she'll bring them here to greet Neneko once they have grown a bit bigger before giving another small bow and dashing back out onto the balcony.

Neneko waves toward the calico cat's retreating figure before closing the window.

"She's so polite..."

Nekonoyama Neneko is different from other people.

In addition to being able to talk with cats just like earlier, she can also turn into one.

Neneko isn't the only one with these abilities. These are the innate abilities of every catkin.

When their entire body is covered in fur and they walk around on all fours, any humans who happen to see them wouldn't be able to tell them apart from any other cat.

Besides the Nekonoyamas, there are several other families with these cat abilities. Why can they turn into and speak with cats? No one really knows, but they have accepted that these are abilities that get passed on from generation to generation.

Most people believe that humans and vampires are the only races intermingling in society, but that is not actually the case.

There are also catkin, dogkin, and plenty of other races that Neneko doesn't know about.

The existence of vampires became most widely known and they were slaughtered by humans in large numbers centuries ago.

Beautiful, wise, and strong. Textbooks describe vampires as if they are special beings out of a myth.

However, despite these merits, they suffer from the fact that they cannot survive without sucking blood.

They were supposed to live quietly among the humans, but something caused the humans to fear them. Perhaps the humans grew envious.

Since vampires cannot survive without drinking the blood of other races, they cannot obtain nutrition if they are being persecuted.

Before long, starvation caused them to lose their sense of reasoning and they began attacking people.

That caused humans to view them as monsters even further and those prejudices led to the era of "vampire hunting".

If a child is born and either parent is a vampire, the child will be a vampire.

Knowledge of this characteristic became twisted and led to the rumor that, "If you get your blood sucked, you'll become a vampire" which further contributed to their persecution.

Seeing what happened to the vampires, the other races began to fear the same thing would happen to them next.

Therefore, in order to protect themselves, Neneko's ancestors and the ancestors of other races decided to live in hiding.

Over time, people's views began to change but traces of those times can still be seen today. Even now, many races live in hiding.

"...Haah."

Neneko's temples begin hurting from wearing her glasses for so long.

After she removes her glasses, Neneko lightly rubs those areas with her fingers to relieve the pain.

"Maybe I'll stop here for today..."

After putting her glasses in their case, Neneko glances at the mirror.

Despite wearing glasses, Neneko's eyesight isn't bad.

The ancestors of the catkin were probably cats who somehow gained the ability to take the form of humans.

Some speculate it's due to the mischievous whims of God while others suggest that it's due to experimentation, but it happened so long ago that only God knows the truth now.

Besides being able to transform and talk to cats, catkins aren't much different from humans.

They have families, names, go to school, and work. However, since they were originally cats, there are many things that they can't help.

Neneko frowns at one of those things reflected in the mirror.

"..."

She has pure white hair that reaches down to her chest. Peeking out of her long bangs are a yellow right eye and a blue left eye.
Since Neneko is a heterochromatic white cat, she looks extremely conspicuous in her human form.

Her father and Neneka, her older sister by two years, are both black cats.

Not only did Neneko inherit the genes of her mother, a white cat, but she was also born with her distinctive different-colored eyes.

Her ability to form personal relationships has only suffered due to her conspicuous appearance. She attends high school online in order to avoid going outside.

Neneko keeps a low profile and avoids interacting with others as much as possible.

Whenever she goes out, people immediately take notice of her white hair and dual-colored eyes not typical for a Japanese person. Strangers would often give rude comments.

Also, since she's a white cat, her light-colored eyes are more sensitive to the sun so she wears thick UV-blocking glasses to protect her eyes and hide them.

Her normal appearance already stands out at the best of times, but her gaudy fashion senses make her stick out like a sore thumb even more.

After only experiencing negative reactions many times, Neneko has become extremely reluctant about numerous things.

Looking at her gloomy reflection in the mirror, she remembers the calico cat from earlier and wants to sigh even more.

Unlike the stray calico cat who is free, Neneko has shut herself indoors and doesn't really have any friends. However, she lacks the courage to step outside.

Looking at the scenery outside the window, Neneko yearns for freedom, wanting to break out of something for the longest time.

"...I wonder if I'll ever have the chance."

After cutting her studies short, Neneko lays down on the sofa in the living room, eating a chocolate ice cream bar that costs 400 yen for a set of five.

With nothing to do, she absentmindedly fiddles with her smartphone when she hears the door opening and the voice of her older sister, Neneka.

"I'm home~"

Since their mother died when they were young, Neneka looks after Neneko like a mother. Due to Neneko's introverted personality, Neneka has become quite overprotective lately.

If she catches Neneko eating ice cream on the sofa, she'll definitely get mad and scold her for her bad manners.

Neneko quickly gets off the sofa and sits down on a chair at the dining table.

She managed to make it just in time. Neneka enters the living room after opening the door and she isn't alone.

Following behind Neneka are her friends from class that Neneko recognizes.

Unlike Neneko, Neneka is sociable and often invites her friends from high school over just like now.

Since she is a black cat, her black hair in human form gives her no problems blending in with society.

"Ah, it's Neko-chan."
"H-hello..."

The one who noticed and happily called out to her was one of her sister's friends from class, Yumehara Karen.

The first one that started calling Neneko "Neko-chan" was her.

Despite Neneko's unusual appearance of having white hair and dual-colored eyes, all of her sister's friends treat her kindly.

The quiet living room Neneko had been alone in just earlier fills up with voices.

Neneko steals a glance at the stunning group of six that entered.

Including her older sister, the group contains four girls and two boys. A sparkling aura surrounds them and if Neneko didn't know them already, she definitely would have never been able to approach them.

"Aoi, what are you looking at?"
"Photos of my lover."
"Again? You're completely smitten."
"Let's play a video game. Video game."
"Hey, did you already forget how badly I beat you last week?"
"Ah! I want to play as well! Let's all play together."

The room suddenly becomes lively as everyone talks about what they want to do.

Matching their sparkly appearance, all of Neneko's sister's friends have bright personalities.

The one person in their group not caught up in this lively atmosphere is the girl sitting quietly on the sofa Neneko had been lying on earlier.

The cool girl who always marches to the beat of her own drum shines especially brightly in Neneko's eyes.

"..."

Feeling like she will be hypnotized by the girl's beautiful appearance at this rate, Neneko quickly looks away.
Among the cheery group of six, this girl has a peculiar atmosphere.

Her name is Tachino Mashiro.

"Neneko, want to play as well?"

Her sister offers her a controller, but Neneko politely declines the invitation.

Neneko doesn't want to be seen childishly absorbed in a video game in front of Mashiro, who seems so mature.

As far as Neneko knows, Mashiro has no interest in video games.

"Eh~ Come play with us, Neko-chan."
"Sorry, I was studying earlier so my eyes are feeling a bit tired."

She apologizes to Karen, who tries to invite her as well, before returning to her room.
After shutting the door, she slowly sinks to the ground.

"She looks so cute today as well..."

When she gently places her hand on her chest, she discovers her heart is still rapidly pounding.

For many years, Neneko has been harboring an unrequited love towards the calm and mature girl two years older than her.

No one else knows about her feelings and she lacks the courage to confess. Just seeing Mashiro makes Neneko's heart beat faster and her cheeks slowly turn red. If she were to use colors to describe her feelings, they would be like a light pink formed from mixing red and milky white.

Even if this love won't lead anywhere, Neneko wants to cherish these feelings.

With her sister's friends gone, the living room feels larger than usual.

Their father, who raised them alone, is staying late at work so it's only Neneko and Neneka at the dining table.

Neneko is in charge of dinner and today they're having Hayashi rice *(hashed beef rice)*.

"Why didn't you play with us, Neneko? You love video games."
"I wasn't in the mood..."
"This was one of the rare times when even Mashiro joined us. She said she wanted to play together with you."
"Eh?"

Her tactic of not wanting to be seen as childish backfired.

She let the rare chance to play games together with Mashiro slip away.

(Even though that was a chance to get closer to her...)

If she knew that was going to happen, she would have accepted their invitation but now she's left with a deep feeling of regret.

She can't show that on her face in front of Neneka, so she can do nothing but sigh loudly in her heart.

"Ah, by the way, the calico cat from District 3 gave birth to her kittens. She told me about it on my way to school."
"...I heard. She made the trip here to inform me as well."
"She sure is conscientious."

Trying to get her mind off her deflated feelings, Neneko engages in the new topic her sister offers.

The local cats adore catkins, people who can take the form of cats.

Ever since the time of their ancestors, catkins have been working with stray cats to provide them food, treatment, and assistance looking for a home for any strays who wish for it.

"I'm thinking of going to visit her kittens next time. How about taking this opportunity to leave the house, Neneko?"
"But, I'll stand out..."
"Don't worry about it! If anyone stares, you just have to glare right back at them!"

As comfortable as it is being at home, staying here forever feels suffocating.

Unlike Neneko, her older sister is a conventional high school student who blends into society.

Of course, Neneka hides her identity as a catkin, but to tell the truth, even Neneko wants to attend school in person like her sister. In order to accomplish that, Neneko has to work on her social skills.

Although Neneko understands that her sister has a point, she can't help worrying about her appearance.

While struggling with her reply to Neneka, her spoon stops moving when she hears the voice of the newscaster from the TV that has been left open.

"It has been announced that the volume of blood packs being distributed to vampires will be adjusted according to the desires of those requesting them..."

Hearing that report, Neneko lifts her head to look at the TV. Her sister has also stopped eating to do the same.

Then, the words that spill out sound a bit envious.

"They sure are generous when it comes to vampires."

Perhaps due to the genocides of the past, all countries today offer generous support to vampires.

Since vampires need blood to live, healthy people over the age of 16 are required to donate blood which then gets distributed to vampires.

Vampires of any age are eligible to receive blood if they wish.

Was it due to the hearts of humans aching after the wanton slaughter of so many who looked like them or did they realize the risk of vampires going extinct after how drastically their numbers have dwindled?

The vampires once seen as targets to be eliminated in the past are now viewed as beings who must be protected after the changing of eras.

"Does blood really taste that good?"
"I wonder as well..."

In addition to the distribution of blood packs mentioned in the news earlier, there's also a partnership system established between pairing vampires with a human they can suck blood from.

This system aims to maintain a healthy diet for vampires. Humans who have agreed to supply fresh blood through these partnerships are said to receive various kinds of financial support from the government.

"They receive so much special treatment. Makes me wonder if they'll ever extend the same kind of support to catkins one day."
"If they do, what kind of things do you want help with, onee-chan?"
"I'd like them to develop a drug that suppresses our heat cycle. It's always such a huge pain whenever mating season comes around."

Just like cats, catkins also periodically go into heat.

When it does, it lasts for about seven days. Neneko heard from her sister that catkins will be in a constant state of arousal during that time and it's tough to get through.

They don't emit pheromones so they won't cause trouble to those around them, but it's extremely difficult to endure.

"You will probably experience it yourself soon. I think it would be best for you to find a lover before that happens."
"Lo-lover...!?"
"Some experience it for the first time as early as when they're 12 years old and even people who experience it late will do so by the time they reach 18. You're already 16 now, Neneko. It could come at any time."

Having already experienced it, Neneka has repeatedly warned Neneko that she won't be able to weather it alone when it arrives.

Their mating season comes several times a year instead of just once. However, suffering isn't their only option. According to her sister, if they have a cooperative partner to satisfy their bodies during that time, it can end before the full week is up.

However, it seems it will be difficult to get through the mating season alone. Even Neneko understands the need for a partner.

Neneko has been wishing that a certain girl could be that partner for several years now.
The image of Mashiro appears in her mind and she frantically tries to dispel it.

Someone as beautiful and mature as her would definitely not be interested in Neneko.
Neneko is two years younger and childish. Mashiro probably thinks nothing of her.

She has heard that among catkins, some become so desperate once they go into heat that they end up hooking up with someone they don't even like. That's how difficult it becomes to maintain their regular sense of self.

"...Heat season, huh?"

It won't be long now. Neneko wonders what she'll do once her heat season starts.
Will she be able to accept her body intertwining with someone she doesn't even like... someone who isn't Mashiro?

Just imagining it makes her heart hurt and before she realizes it, her gaze has dropped down to the floor.

Even though she understands that she can't keep being selfish now that she's in high school, her heart still screams that she doesn't want anyone except that person.

Chapter 2 - Distance and Opportunity

The nurse pats Neneko on the shoulder and says, "It's finished." Neneko looks up from the magazine.

Now that she is 16, she is obliged to donate blood for vampires. She was afraid at first due to her fear of needles, but it wasn't a big deal once she got used to it. Donors are free to read as many magazines and manga as they like while they're donating, so time flies.

After completing the procedures, Neneko rests for 10 minutes before leaving the blood donation room.

"It's so bright out..."

Now that it's May, the sun has gotten stronger.
Both her eyes are sensitive to sunlight. In addition to that, she has always struggled with hearing from one of her ears since birth.

She wears UV-blocking glasses, but since they also hide her noticeable appearance, she has no complaints about wearing them right now.

Even though it's daytime on a weekday, there's quite a number of people walking along the streets.

Since her white hair and dual-colored eyes attract attention, Neneko avoids going outside as much as possible. However, today she is required to donate blood for the sake of providing nourishment for vampires so staying at home wasn't an option.

"Is that girl's hair natural?"
"It's pure white. It looks pretty."

Turning toward the direction of the voices, Neneko finds two women who seem to be working adults.

They said that she looked pretty. Feeling both happy and embarrassed, she pretends to adjust her glasses and looks away.

Back in middle school, the other girls always made fun of the color of her hair.

Even the teachers suspected that she wore contacts because of her heterochromia and gave her a hard time.

People constantly stared at her and said whatever they wanted about her appearance behind her back.

It felt like everyone was an enemy, so Neneko spent a lot of time holed up in the school infirmary.

At that time, the health committee member she often ran into at the infirmary was her senior, Tachino Mashiro.

"That really takes me back..."

Mashiro wasn't the type to talk much to begin with, so of course she never said anything mean.

By that time, Neneko had already become fearful of talking to others. She gradually became charmed by the kindness of the girl who would occasionally speak to her.

They talked about their favorite foods, cute dogs they happened to see while they wandered outside, and other such things. Neneko couldn't help but love how gentle Mashiro's voice sounded, holding no thorns or sharpness. Although they never talked about anything important, those comforting moments they shared in the infirmary became an irreplaceable treasure to Neneko.

However, in the end, they're both girls. With Neneko's firmly-rooted complex added to that, Neneko has never made a move even up to today.

"...I wonder if she has a boyfriend or someone like that..."

At the least, she knows that her older sister has one and she heard that four other people in that friend group are in relationships.

The only unknown is Mashiro.

She just has to ask her sister to find out, but Neneko has never brought up the question.

If Neneko learned that Mashiro did have one, she would be left with no choice but to give up on this love.
Not wanting to do that, Neneko has avoided the topic for many years.

With cat milk and a thin blanket in her shopping bag, Neneko walks along the trails in the park.

The park is so green that it's difficult to think she's still in Tokyo. The trails are perfect for running and there are also tennis courts, so many people around are playing sports.

She goes further in, following the trail that leads towards a thicket.

After confirming there's no one else nearby, Neneko calls out towards the bushes.

"It's me, Calico-san."

After some rustling from the bushes, a calico cat appears from the thicket.

The calico cat living in the park inside the Third District had given birth to a litter of kittens, so Neneko came here to check up on them.

"Thank you for going out of your way to come here, Neneko-sama."
"Are all your kittens doing well? How's your own condition?"
"Fortunately... a girl that's around the same age as you often brings us milk."
"I see... In that case, I'll just leave this can of cat food here for you."

Since there's a girl frequently coming here to check up on them, the kittens have been growing healthily.

Feeling relieved, Neneko was just about to give them the blanket to use as a bed and prepare to go home.

"Neko-chan?"

Hearing a familiar voice calling her from behind, Neneko holds her breath in shock.

She can tell who it is by just the voice.

Neneko nervously turns around and just as expected, finds Tachino Mashiro, the girl she has feelings for.

Her heartbeat immediately accelerates. If she isn't careful, her face will turn completely red.

"What are you doing in a place like this... ah, could it be you were feeding the kitties?"

After Neneko gives a slight nod, Mashiro takes out cat food and cat milk from her bag.

"Were you trying to beat me to the punch?"

Neneko's heart beats faster from Mashiro's slightly mischievous tone.

The girl worrying about these cats and checking up on them is Mashiro. Seeing this kind side of Mashiro makes Neneko's heart flutter.

She's kind in addition to being cool and mature. Neneko can't help but love her.

"So you were the one feeding them, Mashiro-senpai."
"I'm worried since they're just kittens. You're the one who's kind, Neko-chan. Since we happened to meet each other, how about walking together on the way home?"
"Ye-yes!"

After making the bed for the calico cat's family, Neneko follows Mashiro who is walking ahead as her lips relax into a smile.

She got to meet the person she loves and now they are going home together.

As she savors the moment, she wonders whether it's truly okay for her to feel so happy. She catches up with Mashiro and walks alongside her.

When she lowers her gaze, she sees Mashiro's brown loafers beside her, making her heartbeat quicken.

She's walking along the road bathed in the orange glow of the evening sun alongside Mashiro, the girl who drives her feelings wild.

This is Neneko's first time walking home together with Mashiro like this and her heart has been rapidly thumping since earlier.

Although Mashiro is the cool type and doesn't talk much, that doesn't mean she's unsociable.

Since Neneko knows how kind she truly is, it wouldn't have bothered her if they both remained silent the whole way. However, since this is such a rare opportunity, Neneko musters up the faint bit of courage she has.

"Um, will you be coming over with onee-chan and the others today?"
"Half of our group of six are planning to take the entrance exams for other universities. There won't be much time for us to hang out from now on."

Mashiro attends a university-affiliated high school, so outside of anything major happening, she should have no trouble advancing to post-secondary education.

However, Mashiro goes on to patiently explain that the other three besides herself, Neneka, and Karen are aiming to enter national universities instead of the affiliated university so they're busy with preparations and it will be difficult to find time for all six of them to hang out together.

"I won't be seeing you as much, Neko-chan."

After all, their point of contact comes from Neneko's older sister.
Neneko only gets to see her when Neneka invites her over.

To Mashiro, Neneko is just her friend's little sister.
It's clear that if things go on like this, they'll see each other less and less.
The thought makes Neneko anxious.

"Um..."

Just when Neneko summoned the courage to at least ask for Mashiro's contact information, the conversation between a group that happens to pass by them causes her heart to freeze.

"Is that cosplay?"
"That really stands out. She's wearing different colored contacts..."
"Think she has a case of Chuunibyou?"

The exchange from the uniformed male students is undoubtedly about Neneko.
She should have gotten used to this, but before she realized it, she was biting her lips and looking down towards the ground.

Neneko knows that they hold no ill will towards her.
They just happened to see her, were surprised, and said the first things they thought of.

The words they will undoubtedly have forgotten by the time they reach home will continue to linger in Neneko's heart.

She knows that she should just forget about those words born more out of curiosity than disgust, but...

It has become unbearably hard to even look ahead.

Neneko has an extreme complex about her appearance.

"You're cute."
"...!"

When Neneko looks to her side in shock, Mashiro's face illuminated by the evening sun enters her view.

Rather than trying to comfort her, it sounds more like she's just stating a fact. Mashiro says what Neneko wants to desperately hear so casually.

"The color of your hair is beautiful and your eyes sparkle. You're cute, Neko-chan."

She had been in so much pain earlier, but now she is close to tears for an entirely different reason.

Due to her notable appearance, she has continued receiving inconsiderate comments.

Even though she tries to brace herself to not get hurt, she hasn't gotten used to being insulted at all.

"Mashiro-senpai..."

Neneko's heart tightens so much because she knows Mashiro isn't merely trying to flatter her.
Mashiro is a cool girl who doesn't give empty compliments.

"...So raise your head."

Mashiro's hand reaches out and gently touches Neneko's hair.
She affectionately combs the white hair that Neneko has such a strong complex about.

Unable to stop her feelings from rising up, Neneko's next words flow out before she realizes it.

"Um, Mashiro-senpai... I have a favor to ask you."
"What is it?"
"...Could you give me your contact information?"

Neneko was so eager at first, but she lost confidence halfway through so her voice becomes barely audible by the time she reaches the end.

However, despite her disappearing voice, her words seem to reach Mashiro.
Although Mashiro rarely shows her emotions, her eyes widen in surprise.

"Do... do you not want to...?"
"No, that's not it..."

Mashiro's eyes wander a bit in confusion before she continues.

"...I always thought you hated me, Neko-chan."
"Huh!? W-why..."

"...You're always smiling at Karen and Aoi, but don't smile at me at all... You also seem distant whenever I talk to you so I thought that surely..."

It might be because her crush makes her self-conscious, but she gets nervous and avoids looking at Mashiro. Even on the occasions when Mashiro tries to speak to her, Neneko has a hard time keeping the conversation going.

She never imagined that Mashiro would misinterpret her behavior like that. Before she can stop herself, Neneko interrupts Mashiro.

"I-I don't hate you! In fact, I love you..."

Realizing her screwup, she immediately regrets it.
She only had to say the first part, but she ended up confessing her feelings.

"Ah, I don't mean it in that way! ...I mean that I admire you... and respect you... things like that..."

Teary-eyed and with cheeks reddened from regret about confessing her one-sided feelings, Neneko desperately tries to make an excuse. Seeing Neneko like that, Mashiro lets out a chuckle.

"Ah..."

Neneko's eyes fixate on the rarely seen smile of this adult-like girl.

"...Thank goodness. So you don't hate me after all."

An extremely short and simple response.
Neneko catches a glimpse of Mashiro's lovely canines when she smiles.

Neneko wants to tell Mashiro that they look cute, but since Neneko isn't Mashiro's lover, hearing that from her will probably just trouble Mashiro. Neneko shuts those words inside her heart.

Mashiro takes out her smartphone and Neneko follows her lead as they exchange contact information.

The newly added contact info on Neneko's phone unmistakably belongs to Mashiro.

"Well, I'll be heading this way... so see you later."

Neneko waves to her. When Mashiro's back is out of sight, Neneko crouches down.

Her hands are trembling slightly from joy. If she doesn't focus, she'll end up with a dumb smile on her face.

Mashiro's contact information is displayed on her smartphone's screen.

In the fourth year of her unrequited love, it finally feels like she made a step forward.

She obtained the contact information of the person she loves.

That fact alone fills her with childlike delight.

In front of the mirror, Neneko fumbles about as she adds color to her face. Her cheeks have pink blush applied and the differently colored eyeshadows come together to form a gradient.

She doesn't have any plans to go out. She wants to practice putting on makeup since she isn't accustomed to it.
It's all thanks to a certain person that she became motivated to look just a little cuter.

Finally, as she slowly applies her favorite lip gloss, her older sister Neneka appears in the washroom.

"So you're putting on makeup, Neneko... even though it's already night."
"O-onee-chan...!"

Neneko looks at her grinning sister who seems to be enjoying herself more than usual. Neneka surely notices the change in her.

"You're in high spirits today."
"That's not true..."
"Did something good happen?"

Neneko walked home with the person she likes and managed to get her contact information.

Anyone who heard that would probably say, "Is that all?" so Neneko isn't feeling too eager to share the news.

"Do you have someone you like?"
"Ho-how do you...?"
"If a girl who has shown no interest in makeup and fashion suddenly tries her best to look cuter, what other reason can there be? So, who is it?"
"I don't want to say."
"In that case, is it someone I know?"
"It's a secret!"

Just as Neneko covers her ears to escape from her sister's persistent questioning, a cheery ringtone echoes in the room.

Neneka takes out her smartphone from the pocket of her loungewear, and after looking at the screen, smiles in a way that she doesn't in front of her family.

"It's a call from Kouta!"

Udane Kouta is a male catkin and Neneka's lover.
While smiling happily, Neneka disappears into the living room. Neneko can't help but envy the way her sister cheerfully talks on the phone with her lover.

People who like each other and are dating will of course call each other. Neneko envies how the two of them can call each other without needing any other reason.

She takes out her own smartphone and stares at a certain girl's name on her contacts list.

"...I want to call her."

Even after obtaining her contact information, Neneko still doesn't have the courage to call her in the end.

Mashiro might find it a nuisance to be called by Neneko, who is neither her lover nor her friend. Neneko is afraid of being hated by her.

She wants to be on good enough terms with Mashiro that they can call each other casually, but she keeps getting stuck, unable to take a step forward toward that goal.

It certainly is important to wear make-up and put some effort into making herself cuter, but...

Neneko knows that there is something far more crucial than that.

When her eyes opened, Neneko found herself surrounded by darkness, unable to comprehend her current situation.

When she tries to get up, her back hits something and she realizes that she's stuck in some kind of box or piece of cloth.

"...!?"

While filled with fear at not knowing her location, she is surprised to hear a sudden voice.

"Now then, does any student understand this question? If no one raises their hand, I'm just going to pick one of you."
"Eh...?"

This voice, which sounds like it belongs to a male, is speaking like a schoolteacher.

"Nekonoyama, tell us the answer."
"Um, I don't know."

After hearing her sister's voice, Neneko gradually begins to understand the situation.
She quickly runs her hands along her body in the dark and finds two cat ears on her head.

"Onee-chan brought me along...!"

Her sister's gym clothes that had just come out of the dryer this morning looked so warm and comfortable in her backpack. Neneko's curiosity got the better of her and she ended up falling asleep on them while in her cat form.

Then, her sister brought her backpack to high school, completely unaware that Neneko was inside it as well.

It's only natural that Neneka wouldn't have checked to see if her little sister was sleeping on the gym clothes in her backpack.

This situation is definitely Neneko's fault.

Just as Neneko panics over what to do, the chime that signals the end of class rings.
The classroom immediately becomes more noisy and after the sound of a zipper opening, the surroundings get brighter.

"I'm hungry~ I want to eat my bread soon... huh!?"

Neneka immediately closes the zipper she just opened after seeing the distinctive dual-colored eyes inside her backpack.

Neneko's surroundings become dark again as she listens to her sister's panicked voice on the other side of the backpack.

"Neneka, what's wrong?"
"Go on without me!"

The backpack begins to shake violently as Neneko hears her sister's heavy breathing.

After some time, the zipper opens again. Neneko notices they have moved from the classroom to the back of the school.

Neneka lifts her body with both her hands and Neneko is finally out of the narrow backpack.

"What are you doing!?"
"Your gym clothes were so warm and comfortable that I fell asleep on them..."
"So I didn't notice and brought you along, huh..."

Seeing her older sister droop her head, Neneko's guilt gradually builds.

Her sister has always been worrying about her and today as well, Neneko caused her to needlessly worry.

"Sorry..."
"No use for regrets now that you're here... can you endure like this until the end of school?"
"How about I head home by myself...?"
"Absolutely not! A heterochromatic white cat would draw way too much attention!"

She could change back to her human form, but there's no white-haired student with heterochromia enrolled in this school so she would definitely get stopped by security for being suspicious.

That isn't an option in the first place since she will be naked when she changes from her cat form to human form.

"Anyways, just make sure that gorilla of a guidance counselor doesn't see you! Last time we had a student taking care of a cat at the back of the school and he sent the cat to an animal shelter once he found out."
"Animal shelter...!?"
"That's why you need to remain still in my backpack..."
"Who are you calling a gorilla?"

Neneka fearfully turns around after hearing a voice so low that it seems to crawl on the ground.

"...Ah, Tozaki-sensei..."
"...I thought I heard a meow so I came here to check... Nekonoyama, come with me to the student counseling room."

It seems that he is the gorilla of a guidance counselor.
Humans cannot understand Neneko when she's in her cat form, so they only hear meowing.

"Run for it."
"Eh..."
"Don't worry, just get out of here!"

Spurred on by her sister's desperate voice, Neneko dashes away like a bullet.

She desperately looks for the school gates, but since she has only visited this school a few times for certain events, she doesn't have much luck.

Even so, she desperately moves her limbs and unfortunately ends up at the school store filled with people.

She immediately tries to turn back, but someone grabs her by the scruff of her neck and lifts her up.

"It's a cat."
"It really is. Its eyes are different colors."
"Wow. It's my first time seeing one like this. Looks expensive."

Surrounded by three curious male students, Neneko's eyes widen in fear. Her limbs flail as she twists her body desperately, but they don't let go.

"Meow, meow!"
"Cute~ Look at how happy it is!"

What part of this makes them think she's happy?
Neneko desperately tries to scare them off, but they aren't intimidated at all and just keep laughing.

As Neneko gradually becomes more scared, her meowing begins to grow quieter. That's when the dignified voice of a girl calls out to them.

"Can you all let that cat go?"
"...Ah."

The girl who half forcefully pulls Neneko away from the group of boys is the person Neneko has feelings for.

Surrounded by the warmth of those arms, a sense of security envelops Neneko as she gently nuzzles up against the girl's body.

"This cat is mine."
"It belongs to you, Tachino...?"
"That's right. Seems like my cat ended up in my bag and snuck out."
"Seriously? It looks completely like a stray. Our bad for touching it."

After seeing the boys leave, Neneko exhales in relief.
They didn't seem like scary people, but she was extremely afraid they would do something bad to her.

"Are you okay?"
"Meow."

After Neneko's reply, Mashiro gently pats her head.

Once again, Neneko has been saved by Mashiro.

Back when Neneko was still in her sixth year at elementary school, she was not as afraid of going outside. She was taking a stroll in her cat form when she had the misfortune of running into some rowdy middle school boys who decided to pick on her.

At that time, Mashiro happened to be passing by and saved her.

Even though Mashiro was also extremely scared, she still intervened to save Neneko.

After that, Neneko entered middle school and met Mashiro again.
It didn't take much time before she got charmed by Mashiro's inner kindness.

Neneko's first love that no one else knows about only grew more intense the more she got to know Mashiro.

Even now, her heart is pounding. Mashiro uses the cardigan around her waist to wrap up Neneko.

"Just bear this for a while, okay?"

Neneko just returns a blank stare, unable to comprehend the situation, before she finds herself inside Mashiro's bag.

The zipper slowly closes and she feels the bag shake in the darkness as Mashiro begins to walk.

"Sensei, I have to leave early for a memorial service."
"Very well, you are excused."

Cold sweat slowly forms as Neneko finally realizes the gravity of her situation.
Even if she struggles inside the shaking bag, she can't break free. Mashiro doesn't let her out no matter how much she cries out.

Despite the dire situation, she can't help feeling excited from the scent of fabric softener coming from a handkerchief that also happens to be inside the bag.

After some time, the shaking stops and Neneko hears the sound of a zipper opening above her head. Her eyes narrow as her surroundings brighten.

When she timidly looks out of the bag, she sees an unfamiliar room.

Mustering her courage, she gets out of the bag and the girl she loves gently pats her.

"Don't be scared."

While saying that, Mashiro shows her the kindest smile that Neneko has seen from her thus far.

The extremely lovely way the corner of her mouth has lifted makes Neneko's heart skip a beat.

She has been bringing food to the calico cat and this isn't the first time she has saved Neneko.

Knowing all this, there's no longer any doubt.
Mashiro must be a hardcore cat lover.

"This apartment doesn't allow pets, so do you think you can stay quiet...?"
"Meow?"
"Well, I doubt a kitty would understand that."

Mashiro circles behind Neneko and lifts her tail for a moment.
Despite being in her cat form, there's no way Neneko wouldn't feel embarrassed about the person she likes seeing that part of her.

"...A girl, huh? I'll have to get you spayed."
"Meow!?"

Could Mashiro be intending to keep her?
Having trouble keeping up with these sudden developments, Neneko feels Mashiro stroking her extremely fondly.

"Let's get along from now on."

Of course, even Neneko wants to be with the person she has feelings for. However, she wants to do that in her human form. She has never imagined staying by Mashiro's side as a cat.

The way that Mashiro strokes her right now feels so good.
She considers just taking advantage of this chance and letting the situation play out. Neneko truly is weak-willed.

Striking while the iron was hot, Mashiro immediately went to buy cat food and kitty litter.

The cat food is served in a small bowl before her. Although Neneko is a catkin, her palate matches that of a human's.

However, seeing Mashiro's worried look, Neneko forces herself to eat one-third of it.

It technically isn't harmful for humans to eat cat food, but Neneko can't bring herself to like this unfamiliar taste.

While resting on the carpet, she looks up at the clock on the wall to see that it's 9:00 p.m.

Her father and sister are no doubt worried about her.
Even if she wants to contact them, she can't send any messages or even use a phone in her cat form.

To begin with, she left her smartphone at home. While thinking about what to do, Neneko gets approached by Mashiro.

"Now then, shall we go to the bath?"

(Eh!?)

Not giving the confused Neneko any time to react, Mashiro picks her up and heads to the bathroom.

"Let's go in together."

Without any hesitation, Mashiro begins to take off her clothes as Neneko hurriedly looks away.

Of course, Mashiro wouldn't feel embarrassed in front of a cat. In no time at all, Mashiro had removed even her underwear.

Due to the guilt of harboring impure feelings towards her, Neneko tries to escape but immediately gets immobilized.

"Come on. I know you may not like taking a bath, but please just bear with this."

Mashiro lifts Neneko and pulls her into a tight hug.

Feeling Mashiro's soft skin against her back, Neneko's brain is on the verge of short-circuiting.

"Maybe the water is a bit too hot...?"

After Neneko's fur gets wet in the shower, Mashiro begins washing Neneko's body with cat shampoo.

Mashiro's movements are so gentle that it almost feels like a massage as she washes Neneko's paws.

She also adjusts the temperature of the water for Neneko's sake.

Seeing how much Mashiro loves cats and how considerate she is makes Neneko fall for her even harder. Throughout the whole affair, Neneko keeps her eyes on the tips of Mashiro's fingers, away from her naked body.

With feelings of guilt, Neneko lies in bed next to the person she loves.

She entered the home of the cat-loving Mashiro and ended up in the same bed as her. With the lights off, the moonlight illuminates the room.

She deeply savors this moment she will never get to experience in her human form.

"I'll have to buy a bed for you next time, kitty... and we'll also need to give you a name."

This apartment has one bedroom, a living room, and a kitchen.
Neneko has not seen anyone else here except Mashiro.

Since everything here seems to belong to Mashiro, she probably lives alone.

"...You know, I've been living alone here this whole time... so I'm glad you're here, kitty."
"Meow?"
"...I... was treated like a monster and they didn't want to live with me... so I got kicked out. Well, they gave me a credit card before that, so I have no money troubles."

Seeing her wistful eyes, Neneko realizes this isn't something she has any right to hear.

Mashiro is opening her heart to her about this extremely sensitive topic since she believes she's talking to a cat.

This definitely isn't something that she would tell Neneko.
The two of them are not close enough to discuss such deep issues.

Wanting to cheer her up in any way she can, Neneko sticks out her tongue and licks Mashiro's hand.

"Fufu, it feels rough."

Mashiro brings her face closer to Neneko's and for just a moment, touches Neneko's lips.
The sensation from that slight moment draws out feelings of love from the innermost depths of Neneko's heart.

She never thought she would experience this, the feeling of the lips of the person she loves.

How much better would it have been if she was in her human form?

"...Stay with me forever, kitty."

After saying that, Mashiro closes her eyelids.
Neneko remains like this for a bit longer and checks Mashiro's breathing to confirm that she's asleep before getting off the bed.

She quietly returns to her human form and borrows a T-shirt and shorts from Mashiro's closet.

"...I'll come back to return them next time."

Of course, no response comes from the sleeping girl.
She hastily changes into Mashiro's clothes, grabs a pair of flip-flops from the shoe shelf, and jumps down from the balcony. Being a catkin grants her a certain affinity for heights.

Since the clothes don't quite fit, it's tough to walk. Trying her best to not trip, Neneko walks down the night streets alone.

The truth is, she wanted to be together with her.
She wanted to remain by Mashiro's side forever.

Even Mashiro said that she wanted Neneko to stay by her side, but...

"..."

That's only because she thought Neneko was just a cat. It wasn't because she had any feelings for Neneko.

Neneko knows that her desires will bring her suffering one day.
She craves for Mashiro to reciprocate her feelings.

However, she doesn't think she could have continued enduring the guilt of deceiving the person she loves.

"...She kissed me."

At least Neneko's first kiss was with Mashiro.
Even if she won't love her in the same way and they have no shot at dating in the future...

Just the fact that Mashiro was her first kiss makes Neneko feel like she can endure.
Even if she'll have to have sex with someone she doesn't like once she goes into heat someday...

If she remembers this night, then she'll surely be able to overcome it.

She desperately tries to encourage herself with such thoughts, but they amount to nothing more than bluffs.

"...I want her to love me."

Not as a cat, but as Neneko.
She doesn't want her body to entwine with anybody except Mashiro.

She wants to spend the rest of her life not knowing the sensation of anyone else's lips besides Mashiro's.

"Neneko!"

Ahead of her on the night street, the one frantically calling out her name is her older sister, Neneka.
She must have been searching for her for a long time. Her breathing is ragged and sweat is running down her forehead.

"What were you doing!?"
"Onee-chan..."
"Where have you been!? Do you have any idea how worried..."
"...I'm sorry."

Neneka is so worried because of how much she cares for Neneko.

She relentlessly scolds her on the way home because of how much she loves her.

"When we get home, apologize to dad as well."

Neneko nods, but her sister's words don't register at all.
Her mind has remained on the image of Mashiro the whole time and Neneko's heart feels like it's close to bursting from her feelings for her.

Chapter 3 - Surprise and Partner

"The cat I took in ran away."

"Eh? I'm so sorry to hear that."

Neneko's sister's friends, who have no idea that the cat in question is actually Neneko, are all doing their best to console Mashiro.

"Neneka, is it okay if I go get some lemon tea?"
"Of course. It's on the top shelf. You really love lemon tea, Mashiro."

Since this group frequently visits their house, they all have a solid understanding of the Nekonoyama family's kitchen layout.
Neneko summons up her courage to follow Mashiro into the kitchen.

If she didn't get mixed up in her sister's belongings that day, Mashiro would not be suffering like this.

She wants to at least do something to make up for it.

"Um, Mashiro-senpai."
"What is it?"
"I love cats too... so if you'd like, how about going to a cat cafe together next time?"

Gathering the faint amount of courage she has, she invites the person she likes to hang out together.

The corners of Mashiro's mouth gently lift after hearing Neneko's invitation, but it's not like the smile she showed to Neneko back when she was a cat. In the end, Neneko can't make Mashiro smile wholeheartedly unless he's in her cat form.

"...You're a really good girl, Neko-chan."

Mashiro's hand reaches out to gently pat Neneko's head.
Even though she's being treated like a child, Mashiro's hand makes her heart skip a beat.

"Are you sure you don't mind going with me?"

Having trouble keeping her growing feelings in check, Neneko nods many times while fully aware of how much she's blushing.
As she immediately wonders what outfit to wear, she suddenly notices the look in Mashiro's eyes.

Sadness seems to ooze out of her downcast eyes.

Does she get lonely living in that apartment all by herself?

She couldn't make out everything Mashiro said that night, but she whispered that she was treated like a monster and kicked out of her family's home.

Neneko wants to know more, but she can't ask.
There's no way she has any right to ask in her human form about what she happened to hear in her cat form.

A few days later, Neneko walks down the streets carrying a plain paper bag in one hand while relying on her hazy memory.

She would have liked to return these in a bag with a cuter design, but fearing that might give away her identity, she decided it would be best to go with something plain.

Neneko is heading to Mashiro's apartment to return the T-shirt, shorts, and flip-flops she secretly borrowed when she slipped out of Mashiro's apartment.

When she turns the corner, she finds the apartment building she remembers and pats her chest in relief.

Now that it's bright out, the stylish exterior of the building becomes much more apparent.

"She lives here by herself..."

Mashiro did say she was given a credit card, so perhaps her family is considerably rich.

She's beautiful and has a great figure.

She also has a wonderful personality on top of that, so Neneko can't help but wonder why she would be called a monster and get kicked out.

"Onee-chan never mentioned anything about that either..."

If they become closer than they are now, will Mashiro tell her?
Neneko wants to know, but she's not confident that Mashiro will ever open her heart to her.

After taking the elevator to Mashiro's floor, Neneko quickly moves to Mashiro's front door.

She hangs the paper bag on the doorknob and prepares to leave so that they don't run into each other.

However, once she turns around, she sees a girl staring at her in surprise.

"Neko-chan...?"

Standing there in her uniform confused is Mashiro, the one who lives in this apartment.

Neneko tries to pass by without saying a word, but a strong grip on her arm detains her.

"Why are you here...?"
"O-onee-chan sent me here to... drop something off..."

Mashiro's eyebrows furrow in suspicion at the excuse Neneko made up on the spot.

Still holding onto Neneko's arm, she hurriedly unlocks the door to her apartment and forces Neneko inside.

Neneko loses her balance and falls down. Before she can get back up, Mashiro gets on top of her.

"Mashiro-senpai...!"

Mashiro's long hair grazes Neneko's cheeks, tickling her.

"You're lying."
"Eh?"
"Neneka has never been to my apartment."

She thought it was a plausible excuse, but she dug her own grave.

With her lie exposed and Mashiro pushing down on her, Neneko's heart beats faster as she begins to panic.

"...So, why did you lie?"

She'll end up digging herself in even deeper if she's careless, so she desperately tries to think of something to say.

Perhaps growing impatient at how long it's taking for Neneko to answer, Mashiro brings her face inches away from Neneko's.

"...If you don't answer me, I'm going to kiss you."
"Ki-kiss...?"
"You don't want that, right? Hurry up and answer me."

Even in this situation, Neneko's desire surfaces.
Up until now, she had never thought she would get an opportunity to kiss Mashiro in her human form.

She knows how terribly underhanded it is to do this. Even so, she doesn't want to let this chance slip away.
She can't afford to be picky about her methods.

"I-I don't want to answer...!"

Mashiro seems baffled by Neneko's response but she brushes her hair aside.

Her face slowly gets closer and then her lips gently descend on Neneko's.

The kiss lasted for only a moment. Even so, heat rises up from the innermost of Neneko's body.
Neneko feels sure that she's red up to her ears, never mind her cheeks.

Basking in the feelings of love spreading in her chest, the area around her ears and tailbone suddenly begins to throb in pain.

Then, before she knew it, she had grown a pair of cat ears and a tail.

Catkin can take either their human form or their cat form. However, when they lose control of their own emotions, they grow cat ears and a tail in their human form.

"What...?"

Mashiro sounds extremely confused.
Seeing her chance now that Mashiro's guard is down, Neneko breaks free and gets up to make a run for it. However, Mashiro is one step ahead of her.

Mashiro tightly grabs the base of Neneko's tail and a wave of pleasure courses through Neneko's body.

"Me...meooow!"

While arching her back, Neneko collapses on the spot with a thump.

Since her tail is pushing out of her skirt, her skirt is rolled up, leaving her underwear completely exposed.

In addition to that, she let out that shameful voice. There's no way she wouldn't feel embarrassed.

Since she was grabbed at the base of her tail, her erogenous zone, she couldn't hold back her voice.

"Neko-chan...?"
"Ah..."

Neneko immediately tries to cover her cat ears with both her hands, but it's far too late to fool Mashiro now.

(I exposed our race's secret to a human.)

Neneko's face loses color from the gravity of what she has done.

With her face completely pale, Neneko curls up while desperately trying to push her skirt down to hide her panties.

Sitting with her knees on the carpet, this time her cheeks are dyed red from shame.

Ever since earlier, Mashiro has been touching her cat ears and has had her eyes fixed on Neneko's swaying tail.

Her tail is pushing her skirt up so her panties are completely visible.

Mashiro seems more focused on the tail, but Neneko can't help feeling embarrassed when her panties are exposed in front of the person she likes.

"So it really is moving..."
"Can-can I put it away now?"
"Just a bit longer... amazing. So, what about here?"

After seeing Neneko sprout a pair of cat ears and a tail, there's no way Mashiro would let her leave. Mashiro brought Neneko into her living room and has been observing her since.

"Is your tongue rough as well? Can I touch it?"
"My-my tongue...?"
"Just for a moment."

Neneko timidly sticks out her tongue and Mashiro's fingers extend towards it.

Mashiro traces Nenko's tongue with the ball of her finger as she comments on the sensation.

"So this part is smooth..."
"Is-is this enough yet...?"
"Next is the ears."

Mashiro traces the back of Neneko's ear, going down to the base. It seems like she's confirming that Neneko's cat ears are indeed growing from her head.

"...So, what is the meaning of this?"

After touching her for a while, Mashiro seems satisfied and Neneko senses no wariness from her.

This is Mashiro's first time seeing a human that can grow cat ears, but her curiosity seems to have won over any sense of fear.

"I can't believe it, but... could it be that you're really a cat, Neko-chan?"
"...Please don't tell anyone."

The catkins have kept their existence a secret.
It has been drilled into her since she was a child that she must not let anyone else know.

Catkins have sustained their lineage by forming families with their own kind for generations. Even Neneko's older sister is dating a male catkin that their father arranged for her to meet. That's why Neneko will eventually have to marry another catkin.

The reason she had given up on her feelings for Mashiro ever going anywhere was because she suspected her family would never approve of Mashiro since she is a human. However, now that her true identity has been exposed, any faint hope she still clung to has now truly disappeared.

Neneko's heart fills with anxiety and shame.

"Do you want me to keep my mouth shut about this?"

After Neneko nods repeatedly, Mashiro gently pushes her down to the carpet.
Mashiro gets on top of her like earlier with a smile teeming with hidden meaning.

"In that case, you'll need to listen to what I have to say."
"W-what do you want from me...?"

Mashiro brings her face closer and Neneko feels her breath as she whispers into her ears.

"Something that will feel good."

If she says something like that after pushing her down, then it's only natural for Neneko to suspect something indecent.

Will Mashiro truly request something like that?
Will Neneko be forced to let Mashiro have her way with her body?

Mashiro reaches her hand out towards Neneko and Nenko shuts her eyes. Even in a situation like this, Neneko doesn't know whether she should rejoice or be afraid.

The gentle feeling of being stroked along her back makes Neneko feel foolish for all her no-good thoughts from earlier.

Naturally, the girl she fell for would never do such underhanded things.

Mashiro's request in exchange for keeping the existence of catkins a secret is to regularly pet Neneko in her cat form.

"So cute~... I never would have imagined the cat from that time was you, Neko-chan."

Neneko is sitting on the knees of the person she loves while having her back stroked.

It seems that Mashiro easily deduced that if she could grow cat ears, she could also turn into a cat. After that, she immediately told Neneko to turn into a cat and they have been like this ever since.

"Come to my house twice a week, on Wednesday and Sunday. Then, let me pet you."

Her aim is the cat, not Neneko.

However, Neneko can't even say that she dislikes seeing the happy expression on Mashiro's face from feeling Neneko's fur.

She still has an excuse to regularly visit the home of the person she likes now. She truly is too simple. Just that much makes her unbelievably happy.

"Can I touch your paws?"
"Meow."

Neneko slowly presents her right paw and Mashiro gently squeezes it.

"Still, I'm surprised. We actually met each other five years ago, didn't we?"
"Meow...!?"
"Back in middle school... that heterochromatic white cat I saved was you, right, Neko-chan?"

After Neneko nods a few times, Mashiro looks at her with a loving smile. She will only show this expression to Neneko when she is a cat.

Neneko desperately tries to suppress her feelings, telling herself that Mashiro only remembered Neneko because she loves cats and not because of who Neneko is.

After that continued for about 30 minutes, Mashiro was finally satisfied and released Neneko.

Since she's nude when she changes from her cat form back to her human form, she goes to the bedroom for some privacy to change back and put on her clothes.

She finishes changing by putting on her UV-blocking glasses and gathers her things before going back out to the living room. Mashiro seems to have been relaxing while she changed and Neneko asks her something that has been on her mind the whole time.

"Um... Mashiro-senpai, aren't you surprised?"
"About what?"
"About... the existence of catkins and the fact that there are people that can turn into cats."
"We live in a world where vampires exist, right? I'm not going to be surprised if any other races appear."

She certainly does have a point.
This is a world where vampires who live off of human blood have integrated into society.

Although she has never personally met one, it is said that they look indistinguishable from humans.

Mashiro goes on to say that if such a race exists, it wouldn't be strange for there to be people who can turn into cats as well.

"You know... I told you to come twice a week, but if you ever want to, you can come here at any time, Neko-chan."

Neneko is just about to leave as those words make her rejoice once again.

It almost makes her dare to hope that Mashiro wants them to meet because she shares the same feelings as Neneko.

After getting home, Neneko goes to the living room and finds her father there.

Since work keeps him busy, he usually comes home late at night on weekdays. It's unusual for him to be home at this time.

Neneko's sister is also there, sitting on the sofa with a somewhat different air to her than usual.

The uneasy expression on Neneka's face gives Neneko a bad feeling.

"Have you two already eaten?"
"Neneko, take a seat."

Their father's voice has a grave tone as he ignores the question.
Confused, Neneko sits down on the sofa facing her father.

"What's wrong?"
"You have already turned 16 this year. Your first heat can start at any time."

She has been hearing that for quite some time now.
Even her sister has nagged her many times about finding a lover.

She has always ignored the topic, but even Neneko knew that she would have to face this problem eventually.

"Go meet Suzune-kun this Saturday."
"Um... who?"
"A boy who's a catkin like us. He's one year older than you."

Understanding where this is going, Neneko vehemently shakes her head.

"I don't want to see him..."
"I understand your misgivings, but you won't be able to get through your heat alone. If you don't have a partner when that comes... only suffering awaits you."
"But, doing that with someone I don't even like is..."
"At least it's better than someone who you don't even know, right?"

Having no response for that, Neneko bites down on her lower lip.

Even if they don't like each other... even if their feelings don't align...
It's still possible for their bodies to intertwine. Now that she's 16, she understands that much.

Nevertheless, her heart can't accept it.

"He will be coming here and pick you up on Saturday. At least give him a chance."

After saying that, their father leaves the living room.

Neneka gently comforts her little sister, whose face has grown pale.
Neneko's heart warms up slightly from her sister rubbing her back soothingly.

"Neneko..."
"Onee-chan, were you scared when you met Kouta-san?"
"I was already interested Kouta. That's why I asked dad to arrange a meeting for us."

Her sister and Kouta are catkins who already liked each other when they started dating.
Neneko can't help but envy her sister, whose feelings are returned by the person she likes.

"...I don't want to go."

When her selfishness leaks out, her sister squeezes her hand tightly.
Although Neneka can be strict when disciplining Neneko, Neneka actually

has a huge soft spot for her little sister.

"If you already have a lover, you should introduce that person to dad. If you truly love that person... I'm sure dad will understand, even if that person isn't a catkin."
"I don't have one... there's just someone I like but it's one-sided... My feelings will probably never be reciprocated."

Although she should have already known from the beginning that her love was never meant to be, somewhere in her heart, she held hope that there existed a future where they could be together.

She and Mashiro had plans to go to a cat cafe this Saturday.
Now she has to cancel those plans with the person she loves to meet a boy she doesn't even know. Her nose burns at this cruel reality and before she realizes it, tears start falling from her eyes.

By the time her tears finally began to dry, Neneko had returned to her room with her phone in hand.

She had always been so afraid of calling Mashiro without a good reason, but she never thought her first call would be to cancel their date.

After a few rings, Neneko hears Mashiro's voice over the phone.

"Hello?"

Neneko loves this calm voice which isn't very high-pitched.
She desperately fights back the tears threatening to flow out again as she tries to speak.

"Mashiro-senpai..."
"What's wrong?"

"...About our plans for this Saturday, can we reschedule?"
"Did something happen?"
"Um... something came up that I can't..."
"That's not what I mean. You don't sound too good, Neko-chan."

Although she had just been crying, her voice didn't become more nasally to give her away.
Mashiro noticed even the slightest change in Neneko's tone.

"...I'm so sorry."
"...Don't be. Does next Saturday work for you?"
"Yes, it does."
"Alright. Well then, I'm looking forward to it."

After a conversation containing the bare minimum, they end the call.
Despite the sudden change in plans, Mashiro didn't seem the least bit annoyed. Her voice alone conveyed how seriously worried she was about Neneko.

Covering her face with both her hands, she thinks about the girl she had just finished calling.

As expected, Neneko can't stop loving her.
The one she truly wants to be with is Mashiro.

Neneko wants her feelings to reach her and for them to become lovers.
If she makes these feelings known, would Mashiro respond favorably?

Afraid of things becoming awkward between the two of them if she confesses, Neneko hasn't done anything.

Perhaps she's too much of a coward to have the right to complain.

She crouches down on the bed and swallows down the feelings that she can't spit out.

What does her awkward forced smile look like to the boy sitting across from her?

There was a lipstick she tried on only once that she deemed to not suit her. That's the lipstick she chose to wear to meet this boy that her father introduced her to. Right now, the two of them are sitting in a cafe.

This isn't why she practiced wearing makeup. As if to rebel against this situation, she purposely chose cosmetics that didn't suit her.

On this day when she was supposed to go to a cat cafe with Mashiro, she's on a date with this boy she doesn't even like.

Her impression of Suzune, the boy a year older than her, is that he's a considerate and pleasant young man. That just makes her feel more guilty.

Neneko will definitely never fall in love with this person. It won't even be possible for her to see him as a friend.

"Neneko-chan, your hair is completely white."
"That's because I'm a white cat..."
"Have you ever thought about dyeing your hair?"
"Eh?"

Her cheeks twitch at the unexpected suggestion.
All her life, she has lived with her white hair. Back when she was young, she loved how the color matched her late mother's.

As she grew older, she developed a complex about her hair. Even so, she has never once considered dyeing it.

"Um..."
"I mean, you don't want to stand out, right?"

What he said is true. She doesn't like to stand out.
She has kept a low profile to avoid people's unpleasant comments, but she's a bit taken aback by the way Suzune said it.

"Look at that girl. Her hair is completely white."
"Wow~ I've never seen such beautiful white hair before."
"Do you think it's a wig?"

Hearing the voices coming from behind, Neneko instantly lowers her head.
At least they aren't insulting her, but it doesn't feel pleasant to hear people whispering about her like this.

"See? They're insulting you. Oh, and about your glasses. I think it would be better if you wore contacts."

The more this conversation goes on, the more her initial impressions of him being a pleasant young man shatter.
They're not communicating on the same wavelength and it doesn't even seem like they share the same values.

The women behind her are just commenting on what they see. They probably didn't mean any harm.

However, arguing about this with Suzune seems to be more trouble than it's worth so Neneko just remains silent.

There are few catkins, so they need to remain cordial even if their compatibility isn't great.
Neneko steels herself to get through the rest of this meeting.

After that, the conversation did not become any more engaging. By the time they left the cafe, it had become early evening and it was about time to go home.

Neneko followed him without suspecting a thing before suddenly realizing they were walking down a nearly deserted street.

She had assumed that they were heading to the train station, but they were clearly going in the wrong direction for that.

"Um, where are we going? The train station isn't this way..."

Instead of replying, Suzune grabs Neneko's arm.
Then, he stops in front of a certain building.

"Eh...?"

After seeing "HOTEL" written on the sign, the blood quickly drains from Neneko's face.
Now that he has brought her here, Neneko finally realizes his true intentions.

"It's almost that time for me."

Neneko notices the burning gaze in Suzune's eyes as he looks down at her. His breath has become slightly rough and his eyes dilate like a predator eyeing his prey.

"...Shall we enter?"

When the price list becomes visible, everything becomes so real.
Neneko tries to take a step back, but the grip on her arm strengthens.

"It's fine, isn't it? Look, I know you don't like me."
"..."
"I have someone else I like as well, but my parents are always nagging me about needing to find a fellow catkin..."

He is the same as Neneko.
Even if they don't like the person, as catkins, they need to be practical and try to make things work with the partner their parents introduced them to.

Even though he has someone else he likes, he's prioritizing reason over his instincts.

"...Don't you hate it, Suzune-san? Doing this with someone you don't even like."
"...It can't be helped. After all, we're catkins."

Due to Suzune forcing her, Neneko takes half a step forward.

"...Suzune-san"

He's surely looking at the bigger picture.
After being overwhelmed by the cruel reality, he has stopped getting his hopes up.

It's just as he says. Neneko also has no chance with Mashiro. She'll have to listen to reason and accept that.

"Come on, let's go."

She understands the logic. Even though she understands, she can't move forward any further than this.
Neneko knows that she's being unreasonable.

Her views on love may be childish...
But even so, she does not want her body to become one with anyone except Mashiro.

Suzune raises his voice in frustration at Neneko's refusal to move forward.

"What? Let's hurry up and go already."
"...I can't do this after all."
"We've come all the way here and now you're saying this? We do it once and the rest will be no big deal. You only have to bear it for the first time!"

As Suzune gets angrier, terror gradually fills Neneko's heart.
Even so, she braces her legs and resists.

If she allows herself to be swayed by him, she has a feeling that she'll never be able to smile in front of Mashiro for the rest of her life.

"No..."
"Huh? What's with that attitude?"
"...Let go of me!!"

With her tears overflowing, she desperately tries to resist.

She flails her arms trying to break free and accidentally hits Suzune's cheek hard with her hand.

"...What do you think you're doing!?"

His hand hits Neneko's cheek in retaliation.
Her glasses fall to the ground with an unpleasant clank. The intense pain only amplifies her terror.

"If you two aren't going in, get out of the way."
"Guys who hit girls are scum. Are you okay?"

The man and woman behind them must have mistaken the two of them struggling at the entrance as a couple's dispute. Surprised by the two spectators, Suzune's grip on Neneko's arm weakens and Neneko runs away as fast as she can.

With her cheeks still throbbing from pain, Neneko focuses only on running towards the train station while crying, not even picking up the glasses she dropped.

By the time Neneko arrived at the nearest station to her home after switching trains, the sun had already set.

While walking down the pavement illuminated by the streetlights, she checks behind her several times.

She can't shake off the fear that Suzune might still be following her.

If she goes back home while clearly distraught like this, she'll definitely make her sister and father worry. After thinking about her options, she heads for the park near her home and takes a seat on a bench.

"Ah, my glasses..."

While wiping away the tears that keep flowing from her eyes, she remembers that she left her glasses at that place.

Those glasses weren't cheap. Despite the situation, she still should have tried to retrieve them.

She gently places her hand on the bruised cheek that's still stinging.

She never imagined that Suzune would raise his hands on her.
If she goes against his wishes, then he'll resort to violence.

She cries even more from the frustration and misery. That's when she feels something fluffy against her feet.

"Ah..."

It's the calico cat who resides in this park that just had kittens.
After meowing with worry, she sits down next to Neneko on the bench.

"Neneko-sama, what's wrong?"
"...A lot happened."
"Your body is shaking. Neneka-sama has also been looking for you... and told me to inform her if I found you. Do you want me to go get her?"

The meeting that was set up for her ended in disaster.
She's not sure how to face her family once she goes home, so she's stalling for time here.

When Neneko slowly shakes her head, the calico cat gently touches upon the critical thing that has been occupying Neneko's mind.

"Neneko-sama... you're in love with that girl who brings us food, aren't you?"
"...Why do you know?"
"Whenever you two would run into each other while bringing us food, I've seen you staring intensely at her several times."

Was it really that easy to figure out?
Neneko has been trying her best to make sure no one notices her feelings, but perhaps she hasn't been as discreet as she thought.

"Are you going to tell her?"
"We're both girls... and I'm a catkin. There's no way she'll like me back."
"Why are you so sure about that?"
"A person who can turn into a cat isn't normal..."

The calico cat tilts her head to the side, not seeming convinced.

"This world has various kinds of people living in it. There are those who seek the blood of others, those who can turn into cats... I've also heard rumors that some can even fly."
"...It would be amazing if there really are people that can fly."
"Neneko-sama, if that person wasn't a human, would you think that isn't normal? Would you no longer love her because she isn't normal?"

If Mashiro was not human and belonged to a different race, would Neneko dislike her?

Unable to imagine that happening, she fervently shakes her head.

Whether Mashiro is a vampire, dogkin, or any other race, Neneko's feelings of love towards her would not be dampened the slightest bit.

"It must be the same for her."
"The same for her...?"
"If you like someone, it shouldn't matter what race they are. I'm sure anyone capable of charming you, Neneko-sama, would not have such a narrow mind that such trivial things would bother them."
"Of course. Mashiro-senpai is kind and cool. She might be pretty, but she also has a strong sense of justice. She's strong, amazing, and..."

As she desperately tries to explain how great Mashiro is, she once again reflects on her feelings for her.
From the bottom of her heart, Neneko loves the sincere and strong girl for who she is on the inside.

Neneko has been completely captivated by the kindness Mashiro would show at the most unexpected of times.

"What's considered normal differs depending on the person. After all, our own biases influence how we see the world."
"Calico-san, you're really sounding like an adult now..."
"Perhaps I have gained more perspective after my children have been born."

Neneko's heart which had felt so heavy has lightened just a little.
The calico cat's words strangely seem to sink deeply into her heart.

"I actually heard from Neneka-sama that you went to meet with someone you didn't like."
"...I ended up running away in the end though."
"If that's the path you chose, Neneko-sama, isn't it fine?"

As if to encourage her, the calico cat puts her front paw on Neneko's hand.
Neneko smiles at the small, soft, and warm sensation.

"You're free to make your own choices, Neneko-sama. Don't worry about being right or making mistakes. As long as you're satisfied with the path you choose, then that should be enough."
"...Thank you, Calico-san."

Seeing Neneko's smiling face, the calico cat jumps down from the bench and disappears into the bushes. Perhaps she feels reassured now.

She is not a friend, family, or lover to Neneko.

Perhaps it's because of the distance between them that the calico cat's words seem to resonate in Neneko's heart all the more.

Those words bring Neneko a huge sense of relief.

After crying so much, the eyeshadow that didn't suit her must have all washed away by now.

She never reapplied her lipstick either, so she might as well not be wearing any makeup.

As Neneko slowly plods toward her home, she tries to come up with an excuse.

What would her father and sister think if they learned that Neneko refused Suzune's invitation?
She doesn't want to worry them, so she doesn't want them to know what happened in front of the hotel.

However, they will definitely be asking what she doesn't like about him. How will she answer when that happens?

As she ponders over that, a voice calling her from behind stops her dead in her tracks.

"Neko-chan?"

This is the voice of the girl she loves so much.
Surprised, Neneko turns around to find Mashiro dressed in a casual T-shirt and jeans.

Even such a simple outfit seems stylish thanks to her beauty.
She's carrying a small shopping bag so she must have just finished shopping.

"Just like I thought. I saw your pretty white hair."

She goes on to explain how noticeable it is even at night under the moonlight.
Just hearing Mashiro say her hair is beautiful makes Neneko so happy. It makes her like herself a little bit more.

When Mashiro rushes over, she gets taken aback after looking more closely at Neneko's face.

Confused by the unexpected reaction, Neneko wonders if her shoddy makeup looks that bad on her but then remembers that her tears should have already washed them all away.

"Mashiro-senpai...?"

Mashiro's hand reaches out to gently touch Neneko's left cheek.
Despite her usual calmness, she seems somewhat shaken.

"Your cheek is red... and you're not wearing your glasses."

Having that pointed out, Neneko immediately averts her gaze.
Since Neneko always wears her glasses when she goes out, Mashiro sensed that something was amiss.

"...Hey, Neko-chan. What did you have to do today that you canceled our plans for?"

She doesn't want to say it. Her mind just immediately resists the idea.
She canceled her plans with the person she likes for a blind date.

To make matters worse, she got taken to a hotel and her date almost forced himself on her.

If Mashiro gets the impression that Neneko is the type of girl who drops everything else for the chance to get together with a guy and despises her for it, Neneko isn't confident she would be able to maintain her composure from the mental shock.

"That's..."
"You also didn't sound too good over the phone. Did something bad happen?"

Right now, Neneko wishes that Mashiro wasn't so kind.
After all, Neneko isn't thinking clearly at the moment.

Her heart has become much more fragile after the suffering she just went through.
Having the person she loves worrying about her gives Neneko an irresistible urge to cling to her.

Brimming with emotion, tears roll down Neneko's cheeks.

"If you don't mind my company, you're free to talk to me."
"But..."
"No matter what the reason is, I'm not going to hate you, Neko-chan."

Mashiro gracefully wipes away Neneko's tears.

Truthfully, Neneko is completely terrified.

She's scared of her impending first heat that could come at any time. Just imagining the not-so-distant future where her body becomes one with someone she doesn't like makes it excruciatingly difficult to breathe.

Deep down in her heart, she continues to wish that her feelings for Mashiro would be reciprocated. That's why her heart has been screaming in agony.

"...*sniff*, Ma-Mashiro...senpai"

When Neneko calls out her name through sobs, Mashiro pulls her body in closer.
Being enveloped in Mashiro's warmth makes her tears flow out even more.

Just having Mashiro brush her hair fills her heart with affection.

Mashiro called her hair and her eyes beautiful. Neneko truly loves her so much.

"...I'm so sorry we couldn't go to the cat cafe today."
"Don't worry about that."
"...I had to go... to a meeting with a catkin boy arranged by my dad."

The hand stroking Neneko's hair suddenly halts.

"...But... he tried to take me to a hotel... When I resisted... he hit me..."
"..."
"In the end, I escaped before anything happened... but... I feel so sick..."

Neneko's sobbing gradually intensifies. Even though she doesn't want to show this pitiful sight of herself to Mashiro, all the worries that had been building up are overflowing.
Mashiro puts her hand on Neneko's cheek and looks at her with deep concern etched across her face.

"I know I'll have to do my best... to endure and get together with a boy who is also a catkin... I know I can't be selfish but... I don't want this."
"Are you under pressure to find a lover?"
"My family wants me to find a lover before I go into heat for the first time... but I don't want to do that kind of thing with someone I don't even like..."

Mashiro continues listening to Neneko's selfish thoughts.

She doesn't argue with Neneko. She gently interjects at times, as if to provide Neneko with affirmation.

"...Hey, Neko-chan."
"What is it...?"

"This might hurt a bit, but can you bear with it?"
"Eh?"

Before she's able to reply, Mashiro buries her face in Neneko's neck.
She feels something warm against her skin followed by a sucking sensation.

Realizing what Mashiro is doing, Neneko desperately tries to keep her cat ears and tail from popping out.

"Ma-Mashiro-senpai!?"
"Maybe I should do this in one more spot."
"What are you doing..."
"Hey, Neko-chan."

With her thoughts still in disarray, Neneko's head gets pulled in by Mashiro until Mashiro's beautiful face is inches away from her.

With her heartbeat accelerating even more from their faces being so close, Neneko hears the words she has been longing to hear for the longest time.

"Become my lover."
"...Huh?"

These are the words she had dreamed of for a long time, but she can tell from the circumstances that Mashiro's true intentions lie elsewhere.

Just what could Mashiro be thinking right now?

Having no clue at all, Neneko tilts her head in confusion, exposing the hickey on the side of her neck.

It's not unusual at all for the person Neneko likes, Mashiro, to be in the Nekonoyama family's living room.

Up until her third year of high school, Mashiro had been coming here almost every week to relax with her friends.

"..."

However, right now Neneko's eyes wander awkwardly in the still silent living room.
She is sitting at the dining table across from her older sister and her father.

Mashiro is sitting by her side.
Her sister's confused voice is what finally breaks the oppressive silence.

"Ma-Mashiro...? Why are you here with Neneko?"

Neneka, who had believed that her little sister had gone out to meet with a catkin boy, found her own friend to be the one who accompanied Neneko home.
They couldn't just stand frozen at the front door, so everyone came to the living room. It's clear from Neneko's father and sister's visible confusion that they have no clue what's happening.

"I won't beat around the bush. Neko-chan and I are dating."
"...Huh?"

Not expecting to hear that, Neneka reflexively responds and Neneko's father's mouth hangs open.

"You... you two are both girls."
"We may both be girls, but I'm serious about my feelings for Neko-chan. So please don't force Neko-chan to see any more catkin boys."

"I beg you!" Hearing Mashiro's strong words and seeing her deep bow, Neneko follows her lead and hastily lowers her head as well.
Even if she was lying when she said that she loved Neneko, hearing that still made Neneko's heart pound slightly.

This is the strategy Mashiro came up with. The two of them will pretend to be lovers.

If Neneko already has a lover, then she wouldn't be forcefully introduced to any more potential partners. To make the act more convincing, Mashiro even put a hickey on her.

"I know about Neko-chan being a catkin... and that doesn't change how much I love her."
"B-but..."
"No matter what happens, I will protect Neko-chan."

Seeing Mashiro's earnestness, Neneko's father awkwardly tilts his head. After drinking a sip of the warm tea on the table, he lets out a small sigh.

He usually acts strict, but both Neneko and Neneka are well aware of how much he cares for his daughters.

"...What about you, Neneko?"
"Eh?"
"What are your thoughts about Mashiro-chan?"

For just a moment, she steals a glance at Mashiro sitting next to her. Despite the circumstances, she will still be revealing her feelings in front of the one she loves.

"...I-I feel the same."

Taking a gulp of saliva, Neneko prepares herself.
If she messes up now, all of Mashiro's efforts will be in vain.

Looking straight ahead at her sister and father, she summons her courage and confesses.

"I love Mashiro-senpai... I love her a lot."

Her cheeks gradually turn red. Unable to hold back her feelings anymore, her tail and cat ears sprout out on their own.

Of all things, she ended up expressing her feelings right in front of the person she loves.

Feeling the incoming tears caused by embarrassment, Neneko strongly wishes she could just disappear from this spot.

After seeing that, her father finally nods in what seems to be acknowledgment.

Seeing Neneko unable to contain her emotions to the point of her cat ears and tail coming out must have convinced him how serious they were about their relationship.

The cat ears and tail brought out by her strong emotions are far more convincing than any half-baked words.

"I understand how serious you two feel about each other. However, if you had someone you liked this much, you should have said something sooner. I'm no ogre. If I had known you already had someone you liked, I wouldn't have made you meet other people."
"I'm sorry..."
"Make sure to properly apologize to Suzune-kun as well."

Hearing Suzune's name, Neneko's body becomes stiff. Unable to just watch in silence, Mashiro speaks up.

"Neko-chan's cheek is red because that Suzune boy slapped her."
"...What?"

Neneko's father's voice suddenly drops a lot lower.
The aura surrounding Neneko's sister seems to turn black.

They are both extremely overprotective of Neneko, the youngest child.

"Hey, Neneko, what does she mean by that?"
"Well... when he tried to force me to... I resisted and..."

After she finished clumsily explaining how she was almost forced into a hotel, the two of them stood up from their seats without a word.

Neneko can't say anything in this tense atmosphere.

"Neneka, let's go."
"Can I bring a bat?"
"We must not resort to violence. However, we have to make things clear. We're sorry for leaving in the middle of a conversation, but we need to go out for a while. It's already late, Mashiro-chan, so please stay the night."

After saying that, the two of them leave even though it's late at night. There's no doubt that they're heading to Suzune's home.

Knowing how relentless her father usually is, Neneko feels just tiny speck of sympathy towards Suzune for what is about to occur.

After hearing the sound of the car starting from the parking lot and driving away, the tension finally leaves Neneko's shoulders.

"...I was so nervous. Thank you, Mashiro-senpai."
"No need to thank me. Anyways, now your family won't force you to meet anyone else. I hope you'll be able to make things work out with the person you like soon."

While looking at Mashiro's gentle smile as she spoke, Neneko's thoughts halted at the last part.

She tries to slowly analyze those words, but in the end, her confusion remains.

"Eh? What do you mean...?"
"Since you said you didn't want to be with someone you didn't even like... I figured that meant you already had someone you did like."

Should she just nod here? Should she tell Mashiro that the person she likes is her?
Panicking over how to answer, Neneko chooses the cowardly way out.

"...I don't."
"Huh? Is that so?"
"That's right..."
"I see... In that case, if you ever meet someone you like and start going out

with them, we can put an end to this fake relationship."
"Yes..."

As Mashiro gently pats her head, Neneko's heart is filled with mixed feelings.

Will she ever have the nerve to say that the person she likes is Mashiro?

"Um, I really can't thank you enough for this. Is there anything I can do in return...?"
"It's not like I'm doing this for a reward. However, how about letting me pet you three times a week instead of just two?"
"Are you sure...?"
"Of course. You like doing it too right, Neko-chan?"

Perhaps not expecting that from Neneko, Mashiro raises the corners of her mouth in amusement.
Neneko couldn't help but stare at the rare sight of Mashiro smiling.

She's a truly caring person to go this far just for her friend's little sister.
Mashiro's kindness that she expresses through her actions instead of words makes Neneko's feelings for her grow even more.

By 11:00 p.m., both of them had finished their baths.

Neneko's sister and father are still not back yet, so it's just the two of them.

Holding the hem of the long T-shirt she uses as loungewear, Neneko is feeling nervous even now.

She's all alone with the person she likes.
Add on the fact that it's late at night, it would be strange for her to not be nervous.

Sitting next to Mashiro on the sofa, Neneko musters up the courage to start a conversation.

"Mashiro-senpai, have you eaten anything yet?"
"Since I just bought something before all of this, I finished eating while you were in the bath."

She goes on to explain that she was just on her way home from buying premade food at the supermarket when she happened to run into Neneko.

"I couldn't resist. I'm sorry I didn't wait for you."
"No need to apologize. Maybe I should follow your lead and have some cup noodles."
"Eating cup noodles late at night once in a while can be quite the treat."
"Would you like to have some too...?"
"Are you sure?"

After pouring boiling water on the noodles and leaving them for some time, Neneko divides the cup noodles into small plates.

Worried about calories, she chose the salty-flavored cup noodles, but that probably doesn't make much of a difference.

"Neko-chan, do you have a specific type of people you fall for?"
"Eh...?"
"Well, just think about the people you've liked up until now."

If Neneko gets too giddy when talking about that, Mashiro might end up suspecting that she's the one Neneko likes.

While being wary of that, she carefully chooses her words.

"Let me see... I guess it would have to be someone who's kind, and beautiful... Someone cute, but a better way to describe them would be cool..."

Neneko remembers that day when she met Mashiro for the first time. During that incident, Mashiro was willing to put herself at risk to protect

Neneko.

Neneko was in her cat form, surrounded by rowdy middle schoolers picking on her and Mashiro entered the fray, desperate to protect her.

She doesn't usually smile much, but Neneko experienced first-hand many times just how warm her personality truly is.

"...Considerate with a strong sense of justice... an extremely incredible person."
"I see..."
"What about you, Mashiro-senpai? What kind of person can make you fall for them?"

Considering the flow of the conversation, that wouldn't be a strange thing to ask. After Neneko finds the nerves to ask that, Mashiro answers without a hint of reluctance.

"Hmm... maybe someone who can accept all of me?"

In other words, someone who's very broad-minded?
Would that person be the doting type who prefers to pamper others instead of being pampered?

Neneko thinks about various things. Will she be able to become that type of person for Mashiro?

"It's about time to go to sleep."

After brushing her teeth, Mashiro heads straight for Neneko's room.

Without a moment of hesitation, she lays down on the bed and beckons to Neneko, who is standing still in confusion. She most likely won't be able to get a good night's sleep next to the person she loves.

"Ma-Mashiro-senpai, are we going to be sleeping together...?"
"Do you not want to?"
"That's not what I'm trying to say..."

"I'd rather not make you go out of your way to get the guest futon out for me, so isn't sleeping together fine?"

Seeing no sign of Neneko getting into bed, Mashiro grabs her hand and pulls her in.
Since Neneko lent Mashiro her loungewear, she has the same scent of fabric softener as Neneko.

When Neneko moves her legs, they become tangled with Mashiro's, causing her to bashfully turn red.

Now that she's lying in bed next to the person she loves, her embarrassment causes her cat ears and tail to sprout out once again.

Mashiro stares happily at Neneko's new set of ears as they twitch.

"Cute."

When Mashiro traces them with her thumb and index finger, Neneko almost lets out a strange voice.

"..."
"Ah, your tail is wrapped around me."

Just as she noted, Neneko's tail has wrapped around Mashiro's leg.

Neneko tries to move away her tail which seems to have coiled around Mashiro unconsciously. When doing so, she grabs it by the base.

At that moment, a tingling sensation courses through Neneko's body.
Neneko regrets her actions immediately.

"Me...Meeeeow!"

Her voice spills out instinctively and all the strength escapes her body.

The strange circumstances made Neneko completely forget how sensitive the base of her tail is.

Now she has to live with the shame of the person she loves having heard her indecent voice so clearly.

With every twitch of her body, she seemed to have pushed herself closer to Mashiro, making her embarrassment all the worse.

"So your tail is a sensitive spot. That's cute."
"Ughh..."
"Can I try touching it?"
"N-no, you can't!"

If Mashiro touches her there, even Neneko doesn't know what cry of pleasure she'll make.

With teary eyes, Neneko shakes her head with all her might and then Mashiro brings her head in extremely close.

She's so close that her lips are almost touching one of Neneko's cat ears. Then, she whispers into Neneko's ear.

"...If you show me such a cute face, I'm going to kiss you."

When Neneko's face flares red, Mashiro begins brushing her hair, contrary to what she said.
Neneko wants to resist and tell her to not tease her, but she's so dazed by Mashiro's charm that she can't say anything.

Her mind is filled with thoughts about how nice it would be if Mashiro actually did kiss her.

"You must not show that face to anyone so easily."

That's easy for her to say since she doesn't know who Neneko likes.

Seeming to have not a care for Neneko's agitated emotions and rapidly pounding heart, Mashiro begins sleeping soundly after a while.

Neneko slowly reaches out her hand and touches Mashiro's lips with her index finger.

"...Mashiro-senpai"

She gently presses the finger that touched Mashiro's lips against her own lips.

Since Mashiro is asleep, Neneko could have just kissed her directly.

If she had the guts to do such things, life would surely be much easier.

Even after closing eyes, there's no way she can sleep with how much her heart is pounding from being next to the person she loves. On this day, Neneko did not get a wink of sleep.

Surrounded by the glamorous group of five boys and girls, Neneko's small body shrinks even further.

Even her older sister, Neneka, is among the people surrounding her and has been enjoying teasing her for a while now.

Why is the person they're targetting Neneko instead of Mashiro, the one who's actually in their group and known for her cool personality?

"Which one of you confessed? How long have you two been dating?"

With a happy smile on her face, Karen holds a plastic bottle out to Neneko like a microphone.

"If you two are dating, you should have said something sooner."

Aoi, who usually has a more composed personality, seems especially talkative today. Perhaps she has a fondness for love talk.

As soon as Neneko and Mashiro pretended to be lovers, Neneko's older sister quickly spread the news. After school, Neneka's friends barged in and surrounded Neneko, bombarding her with questions like a group of reporters.

"Have you two kissed yet?"
"Eh~ is that what you want to ask?"
"Um, well..."

They have kissed, but it definitely wasn't as lovers.

Should she confess the truth that their lips barely touched in their only kiss? Not used to conversations like this, Neneko has no idea how to conduct herself. Neneko falters over how to answer.

"What do you think the answer is? She goes to Mashiro's apartment three times every week."
"...!?"

Hearing her sister reveal that so easily, Neneko's face begins to turn red from shame.

Despite the current situation, Mashiro is acting the same as always and sitting on the sofa calmly as she taps at her smartphone.

Did everyone see Neneko as a child because she's two years younger than them? They've been grinning at her and teasing her relentlessly.

To Neneko, who has never been in a relationship since she has been fixated on her first love for many years, parrying questions about this unfamiliar

topic skillfully is next to impossible. As she panics, she responds by blurting out whatever seems like an appropriate response.

When her sister and the others finally let her go, Neneko returns to her room and throws herself onto her bed.

She couldn't help feeling embarrassed as she made up the details of her fake love life right in front of the person she loves.

She only vaguely remembers what she said because she had been so desperate, but she's worried that she may have said something unnecessary.

She hears a knock on the door. After responding, the one who unexpectedly enters is Mashiro.

"Neko-chan, are you sulking?"
"...Because that was so embarrassing."
"We're not actually dating, so you don't need to be so self-conscious."

That may be true for Mashiro, but since Neneko has feelings for her, not being self-conscious is impossible. Being the only one who feels this way makes her feel all the more embarrassed.

Having no clue about what Neneko thinks, Mashiro sits down next to Neneko without being the least bit wary.

This causes Neneko to remember the night they slept together and her cheeks begin to turn red.

"So... I want to touch your ears. Just a little bit is fine."
"I can't get them to come out whenever I want..."
"Last time, they came out when I kissed you, right?"

Mashiro brings her face in closer and easily snatches a kiss.

How many kisses does Neneko have to experience to be as calm about it as Mashiro?

Not used to kissing at all, this kiss that lasts for only a moment stirs her emotions enough for her cat ears and tails to appear.

Seeing that, Mashiro's face fills with delight. She truly loves cats.

"So fluffy~... they're so cute."

In the end, the cat ears and tail are what's cute, not Neneko herself.

Even if she likes Neneko as a cat, Mashiro holds no feelings of love for her.

"Everyone thinks we're having sex three times a week."
"W-why...?"
"When lovers visit each other's homes, what else would people think they're doing?"
"Um, Mashiro-senpai, are you okay with this...? Pretending that we're lovers, I mean. Do you have anyone you like, or..."

As if finding the idea ridiculous, Mashiro responds with a fake smile.

"I'm okay. After all, there's no one who would ever want to be my lover."
"That can't be true!"
"Up until now and into the future... I have no intention of ever going out with anyone."
"...Why?"
"Because I'm a monster."

She spoke softly. That single word from her familiar gentle voice echoes heavily in Neneko.

When she said that, her eyes seemed to suddenly grow cold, leaving Neneko speechless.

She said that once before.
She called herself a monster and her voice sounded incredibly sad back then too.

"Mashiro-senpai, you're not a monster..."
"Neko-chan..."
"You're beautiful and kind... The number of people who want to date you definitely rivals the number of stars in the sky. Mashiro-senpai, you're amazing..."

At the very least, Neneko is one of them.

Not wanting Mashiro to think of herself as a monster, Neneko desperately tries to appeal to her but there's no light in Mashiro's eyes.

"...Do you seriously believe that?"

When Neneko nods, Mashiro gets on top of her.
She doesn't aim for Neneko's cat ears or lips.

Instead, she buries herself in Neneko's neck.

Mashiro sucks Neneko's neck in the same position as the fading hickey from last time before sinking her teeth in.

"Ouch...!"

Surprised by the sudden pain, Neneko twists her body, separating her head from Mashiro.

Still on top of Neneko, Mashiro stares down at her expressionlessly. Then, she leaves the room without saying a word, leaving Neneko confused.

"What just happened...?"

Why did Mashiro bite her neck?
Was she trying to tell her something? What was her intention?
Neneko remains confused since she has no clue.

Her previous hickey is almost completely gone.

Every time she gets up from bed and sees the faint hickey reflected in the mirror, it almost makes her want to think Mashiro marked Neneko as hers.

With her hands tightly gripping the controller, Neneko tries to overtake the car on the screen.

She did quite well on the race track, but in the end, she only managed to become the runner-up.

Neneko often competes with her sister in her beloved racing games like this, but her victories up until now can be counted on one hand.

Her sister truly is outstanding. That's why ever since Neneko was young, she has looked up to her.

"I lost again... Onee-chan, let's play one more round!"
"I'm tired of playing, so let's take a break."

With her hands on her temples, Neneka tosses her controller onto the bed.

It's obvious that no amount of persistence would grant Neneko her rematch, so Neneko gives up and pours some iced coffee from a paper carton into a cup.

"Give me a sip."
"Go get your own cup."
"Come on, don't be so stingy. Ah, I haven't said it yet, but congratulations, Neneko. I'm glad you're dating the person you like."
"...Thank you."

Neneko can't reveal the fact that the relationship is fake even to her older sister.
If she told her, she might get introduced to other catkins again. Even if it's a sham, the fact that the people around Neneko think that she and Mashiro are lovers makes her feel just a little happy.

Thinking of this reminds Neneko of a certain boy that she had completely forgotten.

"Ah, by the way, what happened to Suzune-san after..."
"It's fine for you to not know, Neneko."
"Eh?"
"He's fine. He just got a little bit of a scare. That's all."

Neneka shows Neneko an innocent smile with her intentionally vague response.

What exactly happened?
They probably didn't go so far as to break any laws, but Neneko suspects that something quite outrageous happened that night.

"Anyways, back to the original topic. I sure am surprised. Mashiro has always been full of mysteries."
"That's certainly true."
"It's like she drew a line... and kept us at bay, never allowing us to cross it. The rest of us have always been worried since our first year that something might happen to her one day. I'm surprised that you were the one who got her to open up, Neneko. Looks like we sisters are quite alike after all."

Neneka proudly pats Neneko's head.

"What do you mean by that?"
"When we see an opening to be with the one we love, we'll take it no matter what. Looks like you had it in you after all."
"Is that what you're like, onee-chan?"

Instead of replying, Neneka snatches Neneko's cup and drinks all the remaining iced coffee in one gulp.

"Ah!"

When they were young, the only thing they drank was cafe au lait, but now black coffee suits both their tastes more.

"Listen up, alright? If it's someone you truly love, you must not fuss about the means. If there's any opportunity to gain their favor, take it at any cost. Make them fall madly in love with you!"
"You're really tenacious, onee-chan."
"I hear that a lot. Anyways, please take care of Mashiro."

After nodding, Neneko looks at the empty cup that was returned to her.

What her sister said is indeed true. When it comes to love, she doesn't have the luxury to be picky about her methods.

She has to be more proactive and bold.
If she doesn't seduce Mashiro, her current situation isn't going to change.

If she wants to change the future... If she wants to live in the future she envisions, Neneko must change herself first.

Ever since Neneko arrived in Mashiro's apartment at their agreed-upon time, Mashiro has devoted all her attention to petting her.
The usually cool and mature Mashiro has a carefree and lovely smile on her face.

She looks so cute like this that Neneko feels herself being healed just from seeing that smile.

"Can I take a photo?"
"Meow."
"So cute..."

(You're the one that's cute.)

Of course, she can't tell her that while in this form.

No other race besides catkin can communicate with cats.

If Neneko wasn't a catkin, she would have never been able to see Mashiro's wide smile when she's holding out a smartphone towards a cat.

As Neneko stares silently at Mashiro, she feels a possessive urge to keep this side of Mashiro all to herself.

"Are you changing back now?"
"Meow."

After entering the bedroom alone, Neneko slowly turns back to her human form.

It can't be helped, but she's completely nude when she transforms.

Neneko blushes at the fact that she's completely naked in the bedroom of the person she likes before starting to change back into the clothes that Mashiro folded for her.

After picking up her panties and putting one leg through it, the door suddenly opens.

"By the way, Neko-chan-"
"!?"

Startled by the sound of the door opening, Neneko timidly turns around and sees Mashiro there, as expected.
Panicking, she crouches down on the spot and grabs the T-shirt in desperation to cover herself.

"Meo... please close the door already!"
"I-I'm sorry!"

For just a moment, Mashiro's cheeks appeared to be slightly red.

Mashiro quickly retreats and slams the door shut, seeming flustered.
Neneko tries to put away her cat ears and tail that came out on their own.

"She... she saw..."

Even if Mashiro only saw her from behind, that's enough to see all her bodily curves.
Neneko quickly puts on her clothes while being teary-eyed from shame.

She wouldn't have been taking her sweet time if she knew that was going to happen. While thinking that, Mashiro's flustered expression from earlier remains vividly in her mind.

After Neneko changes into her clothes and returns to the living room, Mashiro flinches.
Mashiro seems to be unable to calm down and must still be feeling awkward about what happened.

Since they are both girls, it would have been fine if she acted more casual about it.
If she did, maybe Neneko wouldn't also be feeling so self-conscious.

"Um, sorry about earlier..."
"No, you don't need to..."
"I barely saw anything, so don't let it bother you."

Since their eyes met back then, there was no doubt Mashiro saw her nude.
With her emotions from that moment revived, Neneko wants to cry as she sits down at the low table across from Mashiro.

"So what was it that you wanted to tell me back then...?"
"My parents sent me a bunch of cookies, so I was wondering if you want them."

The fancy packaging on the cookie tin placed on the table gives it an air of luxury.

It looks like something from the sweets section of a department store and makes Neneko second guess if it is really okay for her to have this.

"Are you not eating any, Mashiro-senpai?"
"I think it's better for you to eat them instead of me, Neko-chan."
"Do your parents not live in Tokyo? You went to the same middle school as me..."
"Those people live in Tokyo as well."

Feeling taken aback by Mashiro referring to her own family as "those people", Neneko's gaze moves from the cookie tin to Mashiro's face.
Showing no sign of offering any further explanation, she opens the cookie tin and places it in front of Neneko.

If her parents also live in Tokyo, then why doesn't Mashiro live with them?
Why was Mashiro called a monster and kicked out of her family's home?

"...Um, Mashiro-senpai."

She wants to ask, but should she be probing that deeply?
Every person probably has a few things in their past that they don't want others to know.

Before she could finish wondering whether her peculiar relationship with Mashiro grants her the right to ask, the intercom rings.

"Hm? Did I order something?"

Mashiro heads to the front door looking curious. After some time, she comes back carrying a cardboard box.

"Ah, it turned out to be the clothes I ordered online the other day."

After saying that, Mashiro slowly lowers the box to the table.
Neneko glances over and can't believe her eyes when she sees the label on the box.

"Eh...?"

"Product: Blood Pack"

Why would Mashiro order this?
Anyone living in this world would know what this is for.

Mashiro hasn't realized that Neneko saw the label yet and cheerfully comes up with a plausible cover-up.

"I've been looking forward to my new summer clothes arriving."

Blood packs are distributed free of charge by the government to any vampires who request them.

These are the indispensable staple food for vampires and the government sends them out to ensure vampires can maintain a healthy lifestyle.

In order to have enough blood, people are required to donate at regular intervals once they have reached a certain age. Neneko had just donated a few days ago.

"...Ah."

Why did Mashiro call herself a monster?
Why was she kicked out of her family's home and living here all alone?
Why did Mashiro bite Neneko's neck the other day?

All those mysteries seem to connect to a singular answer like puzzle pieces falling into place.

Mashiro has been living all alone while hiding a certain fact.

"...Mashiro-senpai, are you a vampire?"

The moment everything made sense in her head, Neneko couldn't help but ask. Mashiro immediately stops coming up with excuses and her eyes widen.
Soon after, Mashiro's voice begins to tremble as she loses her composure.

"W-what are you saying...?"
"Right there, it says blood pack on the label."

Neneko grabs Mashiro's hands when she tries to hide the box. Seeing how scared Mashiro looks, Neneko closes her eyes and gathers her courage.

"I... I have a favor to ask of you!"

Her sister's words echo in her mind.

"If it's someone you truly love, you must not fuss about the means. If there's any opportunity to gain their favor, take it at any cost. Make them fall madly in love with you!"

Remembering her sister's advice, this situation seems to be the time to make use of it.

"Please make me your bloodsucking partner, senpai!"

She bows deeply to make her appeal while her hands still tightly holding Mashiro's. Neneko is surprised by her own assertiveness.

A bloodsucking partnership is formed between a vampire and a person whose blood gets sucked.

There are no specific restrictions for the partner. It can be a lover, friend, or anyone else. That's why both parties can form a partnership regardless of their sex once they reach the age of 16.

The two people who have formed a partnership will gain a great deal of financial support from the government.
Since it's no trivial task to exclusively provide blood to a vampire, becoming partners is said to be a special relationship different from marriage. That is to say, the parties involved will have a strong bond backed by a contract.

"I'm fine with you sucking my blood as much as you like, so..."
"...Neko-chan, do you know what you're saying?"

When Neneko nods, Mashiro seems to grow even more bewildered as her eyes shake.

"People normally don't like getting their blood sucked."
"If it's with you, Mashiro-senpai... then I don't mind."
"Why?"

Neneko wants to reveal that it's because she loves her, but something tells her now isn't the right time.

If Neneko confesses with this timing, her words definitely won't reach Mashiro's heart.

In the end, she just comes up with a plausible explanation.

"I-it's because you've helped me out a lot, senpai. I want to do something to repay the favor."
"...In that case, let's test that out."

Mashiro pulls Neneko's body towards her and then gently pins her down to the carpet.

Unlike her usual calm self, Mashiro stares down at Neneko anxiously.

"I'm really going to suck your blood if you don't stop me."
"I don't mind if it's you, Mashiro-senpai."
"...I don't even know if this is going to hurt."

After removing the top three buttons on Neneko's blouse, Mashiro begins kissing Neneko's exposed collarbone.

That combined with the feeling of Mashiro's long black hair against her skin makes Neneko squirm.

"Ngh..."

Mashiro sucks on Neneko's skin numerous times before her lips glide to the side of her neck.

Her current position is the same as where she gave Neneko a hickey on that day.

Just as Neneko thinks this is going smoother than expected, she feels a sharp pain when Mashiro sinks her teeth in.

"...Nngh..."

She hears Mashiro gulping while feeling the blood get sucked out of her neck.

However, what stands out above all of that is Mashiro's heavy breathing as she drinks Neneko's blood. Mashiro seems to be really enjoying this and the voice she occasionally lets out causes Neneko's heart to pound quicker, completely overshadowing the pain.

After some time, Mashiro slowly raises her head while wiping her mouth. Neneko can't look away from the feverish look in Mashiro's moistened eyes.

"...Like I said, Neko-chan. I don't know what will happen."

Even though this is just bloodsucking, Neneko feels as embarrassed as if her whole body is exposed.

The fact that her bra is partially visible because her blouse had to be opened only further fuels her embarrassment.

"I'll get the documents tomorrow."
"Eh?"
"We'll be needing those to become partners. That's what you want, right?"
"Is this really okay...?"

Hearing the surprise in Neneko's voice, Mashiro's expression returns to what it's usually like when she's teasing Neneko. She has a profound smile on her face.

Some of Neneko's blood is still visible on her face, making her look extremely bewitching.

"...I wonder what will happen next."

That's a feeling shared by both Neneko and Mashiro.
Neneko has no idea how the relationship between the two of them will change from now on.

Even so, this is a huge step after spinning her wheels for years.

Using her own hands, Neneko seized the opportunity that may allow them to move forward.

She gently touches the side of her neck with her hand, remembering the feeling of Mashiro's tongue on it earlier.

In order to not waste a drop, Mashiro licked her neck. Thanks to that, Neneko's body feels slightly flushed.

The person she loves enjoyed drinking her blood so much and now Neneko's blood is keeping her alive.

A part of Neneko is now inside Mashiro. Neneko can think of nothing else that would make her feel more honored and excited than that.

Neneko's heart fills with euphoria.

Neneko fills a large suitcase with skin care products, underwear, her favorite fragrances, clothes, and other things.

She couldn't fit all her winter clothes, so she'll have to come back for them when the season changes.

Neneko calls out to her father, who's still in his pajamas and reading the Saturday morning newspaper in the living room.

"Alright, I'll be leaving now."
"If you end up feeling lonely, come back here at any time."

After saying that, her father turns his attention back to the newspaper.

Although she'll be close enough that the nearest train station won't even change, they won't be living together from now on so the farewell feels a bit disappointing.

As she puts on her shoes at the front door, Neneka comes to see her off.

"Dad is going to miss you. I never thought that you would end up moving out before me, Neneko."

Since Neneko has successfully signed the contract to become partners with Mashiro, she will be living at Mashiro's apartment from now on as her partner.

The contract stipulates that partners must live together to ensure the vampire receives a healthy diet.

"I never realized that Mashiro was a vampire."
"Even you didn't know, onee-chan?"
"Of course. That goes for Aoi... and even Karen as well. None of us knew. Even though we've been together for three years..."

Neneka goes on to explain that during lunchtime at school, Mashiro ate bread and bentos just like everyone else and she has never been seen drinking from a blood pack.

Vampires have a sense of taste just like humans, though they can't get nourishment from anything other than blood.

Without regular intake of blood, vampires won't be able to function properly in their daily lives.

"If you two end up fighting or something, you can come back at any time."
"Dad said something similar as well."
"After all, I'll be lonely without my cute little sister around! ...Hey, are you really going to leave?"

Neneko chuckles at her overprotective sister's reluctant face and then pulls her into a tight hug.

After promising to keep in touch, Neneko leaves the home she has lived in for her whole life.

Up until now, she had no self-confidence and was worried about her appearance so she has always stayed at home. Now, her heart pounds with

excitement as she leaves that home with this rattling suitcase to start her new life of living together with the person she loves.

Her steps as she heads for the home where Mashiro is waiting for her feel extremely light.

Chapter 4 - Close Yet Distant

As long as the vampire and their partner are both over the age of 16, there's no major review or anything like that required to enter a bloodsucking relationship. Even if either are below that age, their parents and guardians just need to sign some of the documents in their place.

Since none of their parents had any objections, things progressed without a hitch.

With all of that done, their first day of living together begins.
From Mashiro's point of view, they just happen to be two people under the same roof but Neneko secretly hopes that this will be the start of them living together as lovers. Since she was busy organizing all her stuff after moving in, she bought a hamburger bento from the nearby convenience store and is eating that now for dinner.

On the opposite side of the low table, Mashiro is enjoying a blood pack.

"...Um, Mashiro-senpai."
"Hm?"

She continues sucking the blood pack through a straw.

The vampires from centuries past may have found the sight confounding, but this is surely the norm for vampires of today.

"Never mind..."
"Is the smell of the blood bothering you?"
"That's not the case..."

They had entered a bloodsucking relationship and Neneko had already prepared herself, but...

Even though Neneko had prepared to have her blood sucked for all of Mashiro's meals when she came to this apartment, Mashiro is drinking from a government-provided blood pack instead of asking for Neneko's blood.

However, it would feel awkward if she just said that so directly.
Neneko doesn't know the best way to say something like, "Please drink my blood."

"Can you still get blood packs even after entering a bloodsucking partnership?"
"That's right. The government is quite generous when it comes to vampires."
"In that case... was the other day the first time you've ever sucked blood from someone?"
"Indeed."

To Mashiro, Neneko is her first when it comes to sucking blood.

Neneko's simple heart pounds at even such little things.

"Still, I never realized that the blood from blood packs and freshly sucked blood would taste different."
"I-is that so?"

Only a vampire would be intimately familiar with the taste of blood.
Neneko is a bit scared to inquire what those differences are.

Could it be that Mashiro doesn't think Neneko's blood tastes good?
If so, that would explain why Mashiro doesn't ask to suck her blood even when she's right in front of her. Neneko's thoughts slowly proceed in that negative direction.

Neneko grips the hem of her favorite white loungewear tightly.

After getting out of the bath and drying her hair, it has become late and now it's time for bed.

"W-we're going to be sleeping together...!?"
"I don't have a guest futon or sofa."

Mashiro has led Neneko to her bedroom and lies down on the bed without a care in the world.

Back when Mashiro spent the night in Neneko's room as well, she wasn't shy at all about the two of them sleeping together.

Is it because Mashiro has no romantic interest in her that she's completely unfazed by the idea of sleeping with Neneko?

"Come on, let's go to sleep."
"Y-yes..."

Neneko has visited Mashiro's apartment several times and seeing this bed has never failed to make her heart pound.

She would always imagine if there was ever a chance that she could one day sleep next to Mashiro on this bed.

It already happened one time when Mashiro mistook her for a stray cat and brought her home. However, this time Neneko's wish will be granted while she is in her human form, though they still won't be sharing the same feelings.

The single bed is not meant to have two people in it, so some parts of their bodies end up touching.

"...Perhaps this is a bit too small?"
"It is small, but I think it's all right."

The two of them face each other and Neneko's attention is completely on Mashiro's striking face before her.

Mashiro's jet-black hair and Neneko's white hair overlap, their colors mixing.

"You're really strange, Neko-chan."
"Eh?"
"Since you wanted to form a partnership with someone like me."

It's precisely because it's Mashiro that Neneko wanted to become her partner.

A girl as attractive as Mashiro would surely have many people of all ages and genders aiming for Neneko's current position.

Gazing into Mashiro's beautiful black eyes, Neneko finally asks what has been bothering her.

"Does my blood not taste good...?"

Did Mashiro not drink Neneko's blood this evening because she doesn't like it?

Why did she choose the preserved blood from the blood pack over Neneko's fresh blood?

No matter how roughly her blood gets sucked, Neneko wouldn't have minded as long it was Mashiro...

Mashiro just stares back blankly at Neneko.

"Huh? Why would you think that?"
"...Since you didn't suck my blood today."

After Neneko mumbles that, Mashiro suddenly gets up and climbs on top of Neneko.

Suddenly being pushed down on top of the bed of the person she loves, Neneko's face immediately turns red with shame and anticipation.

"...Didn't it hurt? The last time we did it."

Those black eyes stare fixedly at Neneko.

It did hurt a bit, but Neneko's excitement at being sucked by Mashiro was greater. Perhaps her joy was stronger because the person she loved was doing that to her.

"...It did, but more than that, I felt happy tha-...!?"

Before she could finish speaking, Mashiro buried her face into the side of Neneko's neck.

Neneko can't help feeling ticklish as Mashiro's tongue licks her neck, trying to pick a position.

While lightly biting down on her bottom lip, Neneko summons the courage to put her arms around Mashiro's back.

Imagining the incoming pain of her neck being pierced, Neneko tightly shuts her eyes.

"Ngh...!"

She feels Mashiro's sucking strongly against her skin, but there the sensation of her neck getting pierced is noticeably absent.

Mashiro raises her head and then looks down at Neneko, smiling mischievously.

"I'm not hungry right now."

Neneko's own eyes must be filled with anticipation.

Wanting to be sucked by Mashiro, she can't help feeling a sense of dissatisfaction.

She touches the side of her neck to find it still slightly wet from Mashiro's saliva.

"We'll save it for next time."

When will that next time come?
Being sucked by Mashiro is when Neneko gets to feel Mashiro's heat, her tongue, and her soft hair on her body.

Right now, doing that is the only way Neneko can get closer to her.

When her neck got licked, Neneko truly had gotten her hopes up.

She was filled with desire for Mashiro's tongue to move to more indecent spots, whether it be her lips or other parts of her body.

The next morning, Neneko stands in front of the washroom mirror staring at the dark hickey on her neck.

Even though the previous one had disappeared, a fresh mark was just engraved on her.

In the end, Neneko couldn't sleep at all due to her nerves keeping her up throughout the long night.

After finishing up her skincare routine in the washroom, she enters the kitchen and wraps an apron around her waist.

She opens up the fridge to find only eggs, bacon, bottles of lemon tea, and blood packs. There's nothing else inside.

Glad that she decided to buy some bread along with her bento at the convenience store last night, she makes bacon and eggs.

"Does Mashiro-senpai want any...?"

After making her own portion, she wonders if she should wash the frying pan.

Instead of doing everything again later, she decides to make some for Mashiro as well just in case.

However, a vampire like her only needs blood to survive.
She doesn't need to worry about nutritional balance. As long as her intake of blood remains steady, she'll be able to maintain her health.

Still, Neneko will end up feeling lonely if she just eats by herself every day.

"Neko-chan, you're up early... Mornin'."
"Good morning."

Neneko turns towards the direction of the voice to find a sleepy Mashiro standing there rubbing her eyelids. Her usual beautiful and straight black hair looks slightly disheveled due to bed hair. Neneko would have never imagined this scene from how Mashiro usually presents herself.

As Neneko sears this rare image into her memory, she asks the question she had been wondering about just earlier.

"I'm making breakfast now, do you want to eat together?"
"Sure... prepare a blood pack for me."

Even when she's hungry, instead of asking for Neneko's blood, she gets a blood pack.

Neneko pouts her lips, knowing that Mashiro won't notice since she is heading for the washroom.

She adds some oil to the frying pan she used earlier, cracks an egg open, and makes bacon and eggs again.

Using the toaster, she toasts two pieces of bread and puts one on each plate to accompany the bacon and eggs.

After some deliberation, she breaks the seal on a blood pack, pours it into a large mug, and inserts a straw to make it easier to drink.

She puts the two plates on the low table and takes a seat, waiting for Mashiro to finish her preparations.

"Good morning... huh?"

Mashiro reappears in the living room, now looking wide awake. Finishing her skincare routine must have refreshed her.

Her face lights up in astonishment after seeing the food on the table.

"Is this portion meant for me?"
"Did you not want any?"
"That isn't the case... I'm so happy. Thank you."

The gentle, unexpected smile on Mashiro's face causes Neneko's chest to tighten.

Whether she was in her human form or her cat form, Neneko has never witnessed that until now.

A smile that shows Mashiro's joy.
Seeing a new side of Mashiro, Neneko's simple heart revels in delight.

She wants to see even more.
Neneko wants to bring out more of Mashiro's expressions that no one has ever seen and keep them all to herself.

She's aware that she's being selfish, but she can't keep her desires contained with Mashiro so close by.

Neneko walks together with the person she loves in the shopping mall that she often came to with her family back when she was little.

This building is on the outskirts of Tokyo so it's not that big, but it has restaurants, furniture stores, and places that sell miscellaneous goods. Various fashion brands have set up shop here, so this place is popular with people of all ages.

Neneko originally planned to come here by herself to buy some of the necessities she would need for their life together, but Mashiro wanted to tag along so she quickly changed plans and they're now here together.

She's still giddy about the fact that Mashiro wanted to come with her and has been stealing glances at Mashiro's sandals since earlier.

"I'm sorry that I made you come to a place like this with me..."
"You don't need to worry about that. So, which design are you going with?"

The first place they entered was a well-known glasses store from a prestigious chain.

Neneko had come here to find a replacement for her beloved UV-blocking glasses she lost in the incident a few days ago.

"Are these thin ones no good?"
"My eyes are more sensitive to light than most people's."
"Sounds like a handful."

After some thinking, Neneko chooses the same frame she had before but in a different color.

Since there are no issues with her eyesight, she just buys non-prescription lenses for them before leaving the store.

She puts on glasses for the first time in a while and breathes a sigh of relief. Being able to hide her face again reassures her.

"Ah..."

Something happened to catch Neneko's eyes through her new glasses and she couldn't help letting out her voice. It is the store that sells contact lenses that she usually passes by without giving a second thought.

There are various kinds of contact lenses on display inside the store.

Neneko has heard that there are also UV-blocking contacts, but she had never put much thought into fashion until now so she has been okay with sticking to glasses.

Above all, she found it convenient being able to hide her face with her glasses, so she has never once considered switching to contacts.

Wearing glasses makes her dual-colored eyes just a bit less noticeable and she has always been thinking about how to stop people from staring at her.

"Are you interested in getting contacts?"
"...I'm just wondering if contacts might be better than glasses after all."
"Why?"

The words of the boy she had met only once naturally drifted into her mind.

He had told her it would be better for her to wear contacts instead of glasses. Those words have stayed at the back of her mind ever since.

Her uncertainty might have been why it had taken her so long to buy new glasses.

"Up until now, I had always thought that glasses were better. It helps me hide my dual-colored eyes just a little... and I thought there wouldn't be any point in someone like me trying to be stylish..."

However, now that Mashiro is by her side, she wants Mashiro to think of her as cute in any small way possible.

Then, if things go well, perhaps Mashiro will begin to develop feelings for her.

"The colors of your eyes are beautiful, Neko-chan."
"Eh...?"
"There's no need to hide them, though you don't need to worry about being stylish since you're already cute when you're wearing glasses."
"I-in that case, which do you prefer, Mashiro-senpai... contacts or glasses...?"
"I like both."

While saying that, Mashiro smiles at Neneko. It's her usual gentle smile and voice.

This person truly doesn't play fair.
She always has Neneko at her mercy by easily saying such things that delight Neneko.

Even though Neneko understands that she must not get the wrong idea, she can't stop her heart from pounding so loudly.

Like a balloon that never bursts, her feelings for Mashiro just keep expanding.

Stuffing things like towels and tableware into the shopping cart, the two of them walk down the aisles as their cart clatters against the floor.

This large store sells various household supplies, so the cart gradually fills up with essential items.

Neneko secretly adds two matching mugs into the cart and then covers it up with a towel she's buying so Mashiro doesn't notice.

If she just casually puts them in the cupboard without mentioning anything, would Mashiro end up using them?

After finding everything she needs, the two head for the register when Mashiro suddenly comes to a halt.

"Should I buy a new bed?"
"Eh?"

What caused Mashiro to stop was the numerous beds in the bedding department.

She sits down on the bed in front of them and wiggles a bit to test the springiness.

"After all, isn't it going to be tough if the two of us keep sharing a single bed?"

Mashiro looks around. Perhaps finding a design she likes, she heads for another bed.

When she reaches for the pamphlet, Neneko subconsciously grabs her hand.

"Neko-chan?"
"I-I'm fine with things as they are now..."

There's no way she can say that's because she gets to cling to Mashiro as they sleep.

No matter how she words the fact she wants to be close enough to feel Mashiro's body heat, it's going to sound like she has some ulterior motives in mind.

"Be-being closer puts my mind at ease, so..."

The excuse she hastily came up with does not sound that different from her true thoughts.

In contrast to the flustered Neneko, Mashiro lets out a chuckle.

Seeing that face causes Neneko's heartbeat to quicken. Is it just Neneko's imagination that Mashiro seems to be smiling more naturally than before?

"Is that your nature as a cat talking?"
"Tha-that's right..."

Cats love to stay close to their owners so they can get pampered.
However, Neneko's desire to stick close to Mashiro goes far beyond her instincts as a cat.

"In that case, shall we continue sleeping together from now on?"

Even if the bed is small, even if her nerves keep her from sleeping...
Neneko wants to continue lying down with Mashiro at her side.

At the end of the day, Mashiro will be the last face she sees and the next morning, she will be the first person Neneko speaks to.
Neneko wishes for the rest of her life to continue like that from now on.

With both her hands holding the paper bags filled with all the daily necessities she bought, Neneko walks with Mashiro by her side to the supermarket.

Perhaps Neneko's high spirits about her daily life with Mashiro made her overenthusiastic and caused her to buy too many unnecessary things.

Since it's almost summer, the sun still shines brightly even at 5:00 p.m. These days have been so hot and humid that she's now missing the winter season.

"What would you like to have for dinner tonight?"

There's no seasoning in the fridge, so she has plenty more things she will need to buy.
Besides, vampires still have a sense of taste, so she wants to make Mashiro's favorite food for her.

"...Curry would be nice. The kind made using curry roux. I like when the vegetables are cut into large chunks and when the flavor is sweet."
"All right, let's have that tonight."

Given how adult-like Mashiro usually is, Neneko assumed that she'd prefer spicy curry. She never could have predicted such an answer from her, but Neneko finds that gap cute.

Neneko loves Mashiro so much that she accepts just about everything regarding her in a positive light. Neneko can overlook almost anything since Mashiro is so lovely.

As she breaks into a smile in her heart, the paper bag in her right hand suddenly gets gently snatched away and in its place, Neneko feels the warmth of Mashiro's hand.

"...!"
"Is it okay if we hold hands just for a little bit?"

She looks up next to her to see the side of Mashiro's face as she stares straight ahead. It also seems like Mashiro might be blushing slightly.

Neneko is curious about why, but figures it would be better not to ask.

After all, Neneko's own face must be burning quite brightly. It would be more convenient for the two of them if they could blame it on the orange sunlight.

Neneko made sweet curry by cutting vegetables into rather large chunks and adding beef.

After tasting the curry she requested, Mashiro's face beams with joy.

Seeing someone eat the food she cooked so happily fills Neneko with feelings of love.

Thanks to Mashiro, Neneko feels glad for all the effort she put into housework back when she was living with her family.

"It's delicious."
"I'm glad you enjoy it. So you like curry, Mashiro-senpai."
"That's true, but it also holds a lot of memories. In the past, my mom often made this."

After mentioning her mother, Mashiro puts the spoon from her mouth back to the plate.

Before, Mashiro stated that she got kicked out of her family's home. After being treated like a monster, she was told that they didn't want to live with her anymore and kicked her out.

"...Mashiro-senpai, are your parents also vampires?"
"Just my mom. My father is a human."

If either parent is a vampire, their kids will definitely be born as vampires.

As a result of that, the humans from centuries ago feared the rapidly growing number of vampires and slaughtered them indiscriminately.

"I ate the food made for my father's sake. Since I'm a vampire, I would have been fine even if I didn't eat any of that... I wonder if there's any point in me even eating this curry."
"..."
"I'm sorry. I made a strange request due to my selfishness and doubled our food costs. From now on, you just need to worry about your own portion so..."
"Food tastes better when we're eating together!"

After learning that Mashiro finds her cooking delicious and seeing her happy expression when she's eating, Neneko wants to see that face even more from now on.
Even if eating provides no nutritional value to Mashiro and increases their food costs.

"Food tastes several times more delicious when I'm eating with you, Mashiro-senpai, so... if you don't mind, I want us to continue eating together, Mashiro-senpai."

Neneko gathers up her courage to grab Mashiro's hand and Mashiro squeezes back.

"...You're about the only person who would say something like that, Neko-chan."

She's on the verge of tears as she smiles and there's a slight tremble in her voice. Just what emotions are loaded into those words?

Neneko wants to ask, but Mashiro resumes eating the curry as if to signal that the conversation is over so Neneko has no choice but to leave her question stuck in the back of her throat.

Later that evening, Neneko gets out of the bath and finds the empty blood pack Mashiro drank.

Why doesn't Mashiro suck Neneko's blood?

There are still many things that Neneko doesn't understand and perhaps they haven't gotten close enough for Mashiro to tell her.

Even so, Neneko wants to slowly and calmly proceed forward.

Before the clock strikes twelve, Neneko arrives at the park where the calico cat lives carrying a bag with cat food and milk.

In a few hours, the surrounding area will be full of parents bringing their kids home from preschool and elementary school, so Neneko made sure to pick a time with fewer people around.

Since this is a weekday, a student like Mashiro would be at school during this hour.

Students of Neneko's age normally wouldn't be roaming about at noon.

All the kittens the calico cat gave birth to have been growing quickly and laps up the milk.

While watching over the kittens with a tender gaze in her eyes, the calico cat suddenly seems to remember something.

"Neneko-sama, I heard that you are living together with that person you like."
"Ah, how did you hear that?"
"Neneka-sama told me. She also mentioned you two are dating."

Neneko wonders if she should just nod along, but she wants to speak her mind at least when it's to the calico cat.

Given how courteous she is, she can be trusted to keep a tight lip.

"That's not completely true... My family started making me date male catkins, so she's pretending to be my lover to put an end to that..."
"I see."

"We started living together only because Mashiro-senpai is a vampire... and I became her bloodsucking partner. Despite that, she hasn't been sucking my blood at all."

While gently stroking a kitten who approached her after having had its fill, Neneko spills out the thoughts she had stowed away that still haven't been fully processed one after another.

"...I wonder why Mashiro-senpai won't suck my blood... and why Mashiro-senpai calls herself a monster."
"What do you think of her, Neneko-sama?"
"She's pretty, kind... and a truly wonderful person."

Mashiro is both the person Neneko admires and the ideal she aims for. Lately, her occasional smiles have become a source of healing for Neneko.

When it comes to Mashiro's greatness, Neneko feels confident that she can emphasize that to anyone.

"In life, everyone ends up getting hurt in some way. Just as Neneko-sama has suffered hardships as a catkin... Mashiro-sama may also have some bitter memories related to being a vampire."
"...Can someone like me understand the worries of a vampire?"
"There's no need to understand, is there? You just have to be there for her."
"Be there for her..."

The mature words of the calico cat make sense to Neneko.
Catkins and vampires may look like humans, but from society's point of view, they aren't normal.

Every time other people look at Neneko's pure white hair and dual-colored eyes, she loses a bit of confidence. Did something similar happen to Mashiro?

Could she have experienced something painful enough to make her disparage herself as a monster?

If, by any chance, she's still suffering from that incident even now, is there anything Neneko can do for her?

After Neneko uses the dryer, she adds some hair oil as a finishing touch.

Once Neneko finishes applying the excess oil to her bangs, Mashiro reaches out her hand toward Neneko.

Ever since Neneko started drying her hair in the living room, Mashiro has been staring at her white hair fluttering in the wind from her cushion. Now that Neneko is done with her hair, Mashiro touches her hair gently.

"Your white hair is really beautiful, Neko-chan. It's so soft and fluffy."

Each time Mashiro brushes her hair, Neneko's heart warms up.
For a long time, she didn't like the color of her hair.

Even though in the past, she had been so proud of her hair for having the same color as her beloved mother's.
As she grew older, she lost confidence from all the cruel comments directed at her.

However, having her hair complimented by the person she loves makes her see them in a more favorable light.

"When you tell me things like that, Mashiro-senpai... I feel like I can like my own hair and eyes a little bit."

No matter what anyone else says, she'll be able to think to brush away their comments with the thought that, "These are the eyes and hair that Mashiro-senpai praised."

Since the person she loves complimented them, she has a feeling she'll be able to conquer her complex bit by bit.

"Why would you not like them even though you're so cute, Neko-chan?"
"...Cute?"
"Do you not hear that a lot?"
"People say that I'm a chuunibyou or cosplaying, but..."
"Does that bother you even though you're so pretty?"

Mashiro's fingers touching Neneko's hair move to her head and she begins patting her.

"Be more confident."

Just now, Neneko's confidence rose slightly.

After all, she got called cute and pretty by Mashiro.
That alone seems to blow away all the bad things people have said to her so far.

As usual, the bed is too small for two people to be sleeping in so their bodies are slightly touching as they lie next to each other.

The glow of the street lights makes its way inside through the gap in the curtains. Since it's so dim, Neneko can't see the expression on Mashiro's face.

In the end, Mashiro didn't suck Neneko's blood today either.

Every time Neneko sees the blood packs in the kitchen, she feels jealous.
Her lovesickness might be more serious than she thought.

"...Will you not be sucking my blood today either?"
"I already had a blood pack."
"Do you... not want to drink my blood?"
"...Aren't you scared?"
"Eh?"
"When a vampire wants your blood... that's scary for most people, isn't it?"

In the darkness, Neneko can sense the anxiety in her trembling voice.

"I have never once been scared of that."
"...Why? How could you not hate getting your blood getting sucked by a monster?"
"Isn't it a given that I wouldn't hate it?"
"Why...?"

Mashiro's voice trembles even more, perhaps unable to believe Neneko's words.

She sounds so fragile, almost like the slightest push could cause her to break down and cry.
In order to reassure her, this time it's Neneko who touches Mashiro's hair.

She gently strokes Mashiro's beautiful firm black hair, as if handling something that could break at any moment.

"...What happened?"
"..."
"What kind of hardships did you experience as a vampire, Mashiro-senpai?"

After a moment of silence, Mashiro's voice begins to trickle out.

"I'll just be talking to myself, so don't reply."

Neneko's eyes are gradually beginning to adjust to the darkness and she sees tears falling from Mashiro's large eyes.

Despite feeling surprised at seeing her tears for the first time, Neneko remains silent and listens closely. After a pause, Mashiro's lips quiver as she reveals her extremely shocking past.

"...Long ago, I attacked my mother. I wanted to drink her blood."

After revealing the traumatic experience that left such a huge wound in her heart, Mashiro pauses again.

Just remembering it must be painful. Even so, she continues.

"...When I was in elementary school, my mom died in an accident... At that time, I learned that my mom was actually my father's mistress. After that, my father took me in... There's no way a human woman... can love a vampire child from her husband's affair."

After her mother died, her father brought her into the home where he and his wife lived. However, since her father was often away due to work, it was inevitable that Mashiro would end up alone with her father's wife most of the time.

Her father's wife found Mashiro drinking blood extremely creepy, something she openly and repeatedly expressed to Mashiro.

Although she never used violence, the words she mercilessly rained down on Mashiro every day were cruel enough to make Mashiro's heart scream in pain.

"Looking back, it was child abuse... When I was in my third year of middle school, she hid my blood packs while my father was away on a business trip. I was so hungry... I tried to endure for the day, but before I realized it, I was trying to suck my mother's blood."

Neneko once learned in health education class that starvation affects vampires far more severely than humans.

WIthin half a day, their physical condition deteoriates and if they go a whole day without blood, they end up collapsing.

They lose their sense of reason and their instincts drive them to seek out blood in order to survive.

"I was called a monster... disgusting, creepy... and received all kinds of verbal abuse. After that, I was kicked out... and since then, I've always lived alone."

For over three years, Mashiro has been in this apartment all by herself.

Those deep wounds did not heal. If not properly addressed, those deep-seated wounds will just continue to grow worse.

"She never made food for me... since I didn't need any as a vampire..."

This is the wound in Mashiro's heart.
After losing her mother, her new mother abused her.

Having her own existence criticized for so long, she began to think of herself as a monster.
She couldn't accept herself as a being who sucks blood.

"...When Neko-chan formed a bloodsucking partnership with me... I thought that if I sucked her blood, Neko-chan would keep her distance from me... She would grow to despise me and never say something like she wants to be my partner again, so why....!? Why is Neko-chan so kind to me?"
"..."
"Even though I'm a vampire, I'm afraid to suck blood. I don't want... Neko-chan to think of me as a monster."
"I'm not going to think that."
"....I'm talking to myself, so don't say anything."

She's not seeking consolation.
She simply wants to be heard.

She wants to lighten her heart by revealing the secret she has held to herself this whole time.

Neneko has always believed Mashiro to be a strong person.
She's caring and has a strong sense of justice.

However, Mashiro is still a high school student who wants to be comforted by others.

She's not strong. She's a deeply wounded girl putting up a brave front.

Just as Neneko has been able to like herself as a catkin a little bit more thanks to being complimented by Mashiro, she wants to help Mashiro accept herself as a vampire.

It's precisely because that she can't completely understand the troubles of a vampire that Neneko wants to be there for her.

That night ends with the frail girl talking to herself.

After submitting her assignment online, Neneko begins vacuuming the apartment.

She attends high school virtually since she's afraid of interacting with others, but she's not a bad student.

Back in middle school when she frequently spent time in the infirmary, she maintained decent grades despite missing numerous classes due to her diligent self-study.

In fact, her homeroom teacher back then might feel offended learning how her grades have improved after switching to virtual classes.

Done with vacuuming, she begins wiping the cupboard.

That's when she notices a large book sandwiched between a reference book and a magazine.

"A picture book...?"

When she picks it up, she recognizes it as the fairy tale she also read when she was little. The story is about a princess who gets her happy ending.

"How nostalgic..."

The princess lost her mother and has been under the care of her wicked stepmother ever since.

She gets locked into a separate room and all the housework and chores gets forced on her.

However, one day a prince arrives to save her from her suffering.

As Neneko flips through the pages, she notices that some parts of the pages are slightly wrinkled.

"This is..."

There are some round stains in the picture book, as if water droplets fell on it.

The page with those stains depicts the scene where the princess gets rescued by the prince.

"..."

Judging by the wear and tear on this book, this is probably a story that Mashiro has reread many times since she was little.

In this cupboard filled with magazines and reference books, this is the only picture book.

Mashiro may have been waiting for someone to rescue her this whole time.

She saw herself in the princess trapped in difficult circumstances and has been yearning for her own prince to save her.

Neneko gently closes the book and puts it back in its original place.

There's no way Neneko could become a prince.

She may never be the cool and shining prince that Mashiro yearns for, but...
Perhaps she can at least be the thieving cat who steals the princess away from the villain.

No matter how uncool the method may be, Neneko will spare no effort for the sake of Mashiro's happiness.

She doesn't want to see Mashiro in pain like that again.
Neneko wants to make her happy like the princess she once admired.

When the door swings open, Neneko corrects her posture.
She had been sitting in front of the entrance since 10 minutes ago waiting for her to come home.

Neneko heard that Mashiro would be heading home immediately after school today and her hunch that Mashiro would be home soon turned out to be correct.

"I'm home... huh? Neko-chan...?"
"Meow."

Seeing Neneko in her white cat form, Mashiro squats down and gently smiles.

To heal a cat lover like Mashiro, Neneko needs to be in her cat form. Mashiro reaches her hand out to Neneko and pets her.

With her head and chin getting stroked, Neneko narrows her eyes in comfort.

"Meow."

After spending some time being stroked, Neneko beckons Mashiro to follow her.

Of course, Mashiro only hears it as a cat's meowing, but she seems to understand Neneko's intent and obliges.

Neneko leads her to the living room, where the cupcakes she prepared earlier and the lemon tea Mashiro loves so much has been set on the low table.

"These are... did you make these, Neko-chan?"

When Neneko nods, Mashiro gently pulls her in closer.

Wrapped in the warm embrace of Mashiro's arms, Neneko stares at Mashiro's face from a closer distance than usual.

Even without being lovers, their faces can be so close to each other, so perhaps being in her cat form might not be so bad.

"Thank you, Neko-chan."

Whether she's in her human or cat form, she calls Neneko "Neko-chan."

She might have gotten used to that nickname, but Neneko would like the person she loves to call her by her name.

After checking that Mashiro finished eating the homemade cupcakes, Neneko silently moves onto Mashiro's lap.

She rolls over to expose her belly and Mashiro gently strokes her like usual.

"Fufu... what's wrong, Neko-chan?"
"Meow~"
"Did you want to be pampered?"
"Meow meow."

Mashiro smiles as Neneko licks her hand.

Thinking that seeing her in her cat form would heal Mashiro, she decided to snuggle up to Mashiro like this.

The plan seems to be a great success. Seeing Mashiro's uncharacteristically wide smile fills Neneko with a sense of pride.

"Your cat form is nice, but... I won't be able to see your cute face like this, Neko-chan."
"Me-meow!?"

Caught off guard by that, Neneko loses her balance and falls from Mashiro's lap.

She wants Mashiro to quit saying things like that all out of the blue since her heart isn't going to hold out at this rate.

Being so deeply in love with Mashiro, Mashiro can't calm down after just hearing such trivial words.

"Are you okay!?"
"Meow..."

Saying such things so casually should truly be a crime.

There's no way Mashiro can understand how hard Neneko's heart is pounding from that.

"I'm already feeling healed enough, so... I want to hear you welcoming me back, Neko-chan."
"...!?"

Neneko quickly rushes to the bedroom and changes to her human form.

Before putting her clothes on, she crouches down on the spot with her hands covering her face.

"She called my face cute..."

Despite being such a hardcore cat lover, she said she wanted to see Neneko's face instead of her cat form.

Just hearing that is enough to make Neneko rejoice and her face red.

Mashiro isn't one for flattery, so Neneko can't help but get her hopes up that those words are her true feelings.

After putting on a casual long T-shirt that reaches down to her knees, Neneko returns to the living room where Mashiro is waiting.

Before she left the bedroom, she checked the mirror to make sure that the redness had left her cheeks. However, she is about to blush again just from seeing Mashiro's face.

That's how hopelessly in love Neneko is.

"The cupcakes were delicious. They went well with the lemon tea."
"Thank goodness... Welcome back, Mashiro-senpai."
"I'm home."

Neneko savors the happiness from this exchange.

This exchange is possible only between people that share a special relationship.
Such a small thing brings her joy.

"Ah, I just remembered. There's an athletics festival happening at my high school the day after tomorrow. Do you want to come, Neko-chan?"

Mashiro hands Neneko a pamphlet with a picture of a male student wearing gym clothes in the starting position before a run.

The athletics festival will be happening on a weekday, but since Neneko doesn't really have any friends, she has no other plans and immediately agrees.

She sees Mashiro in her school uniform almost every day, but she rarely gets to see Mashiro in her gym clothes.

That's why she'll take this chance to treat her eyes to that sight while she's at it.

"I'll make you a bento and cheer you on."
"Eh...?"

Hearing the confusion in Mashiro's voice, Neneko immediately regrets her words.
Last year she went to the sports festival after being invited by her sister, but she only went there to cheer and didn't eat together with Neneka.

It wasn't just her sister. Most of the students ate with each other during lunchtime.

Perhaps that's the norm for high schoolers, but Neneko ended up thinking about athletic festivals the same way as she did back in elementary school.

"I'm sorry, I said something childish... I'm sure you're planning to eat lunch with onee-chan and the others."
"I want..."
"Hm? What did you say?"
"I want you to make me a bento."

Holding Neneko's arm tightly, Mashiro faces downward while speaking in a quiet voice.
Seeing that, Neneko happily nods several times while smiling.

"I'll make something really delicious for you!"
"Really?"
"Please look to it!"
"Ehehe, hurray!"

Her bashful smile is just too cute.

Neneko's chest tightens at seeing this new bashful side of Mashiro.

She cannot help hoping to become a larger presence inside Mashiro's heart.

"...Like I thought, I still want to see you in your cat form, Neko-chan."
"Should I change back?"
"No, not like that. I mean when you have your cat ears."
"Huh? B-but..."
"What was it that I had to do last time to see it again...?"
"I can't just change to that form as I please. It's something that just happens unconsciously when my emotions go wild so..."

Before she can finish speaking, Mashiro's striking face gets extremely close.
Then, without any warning, Mashiro takes Neneko's lips.

The soft touch of Mashiro's lips makes Neneko realize that she has been kissed.

With no way to keep her emotions under control after getting kissed by the person she loves, her cat ears and tail sprout out before she knows it.

Seeing things go just as she expected, Mashiro happily traces the edges of Neneko's cat ears gently with her hand.

"Meow...! Please stop doing that..."
"Don't you think getting to see your cute face while touching your fluffy ears is just the best, Neko-chan?"
"But... having my cat ears out like this is embarrassing."
"It's cute."

Even when she's not a cat, Mashiro calls her cute.

Willing to kiss her to see her in this form, just exactly how does Mashiro view Neneko?

There's no way Neneko would ever want to kiss someone she doesn't like.

No matter what the reason may be, she can't see herself kissing someone she doesn't care for.

It would be nice if Mashiro thinks the same way.

"You're really cute, Neko-chan."

Just hearing that from Mashiro makes Neneko glad that she's a catkin.
The power held by the person she loves is truly amazing. She's intoxicated by the way Mashiro touches her.

Chapter 5 - The Prince and The Princess

After handing in the green ticket that proves she has been invited by a student at the entrance, Neneko enters the school grounds.

To prevent suspicious people from taking advantage of the hustle and bustle to sneak in, each student is given four tickets with their name on them.

Up until last year, the tickets Neneko used had her sister's name on them. However, this year her ticket has her beloved Mashiro's name on it.

Having proof that she's a part of Tachino Mashiro's life like this brings joy to her heart.

Since it's a weekday, there aren't many guests here to cheer on the students. Neneko's father is working so he didn't come and most people their age are busy with school. That makes Neneko's own presence stand out even more.

"Wow, her hair is completely white."
"Is she related to a student here?"
"I think she's Nekonoyama's little sister. She came last year as well."

While walking around the school, Neneko feels some stares and hears some whispers about her.
Despite being all too familiar with this, she can't remain completely calm with so much attention on her.

After letting out a silent sigh, a cheerful voice calls out to her.

"Ah, it's Neko-chan!"

Her sister's friend, Yumehara Karen, happily gives her a quick hug. Following behind her is Taksaki Aoi. Neneko pats her chest in relief after finally meeting some familiar faces.

"Hello, Karen-san, Aoi-san..."
"Are you looking for Mashiro?"
"Y-yes..."
"She 's scheduled to compete in a race right now."

Neneko looks to where Aoi is pointing just in time to see Mashiro running when the starting pistol fires.
After launching from a crouching start, it didn't take long for her to leave all the other competitors behind and break through the finish line tape.

Since it was a short-distance race, Neneko didn't get to see Mashiro in action for long.

"I guess that's the difference of a former track and field member."
"Was she in a track and field team?"
"She was in one back during middle school."
"Huh... I didn't know that. I guess it's true that being with your lover makes you want to talk about everything."

Back in middle school, Neneko loved catching glimpses of Mashiro sweating on the field while she was on her way from the infirmary to the back gate.

At that time, she wasn't bold enough to watch Mashiro openly, so she only stole some glances when they happened to pass by each other. Even that was enough to get her heart racing.

Thanks to Mashiro being there, Neneko tried her best to go to middle school.
Just the possibility of seeing Mashiro made her look forward to being at school.

"How nostalgic..."

Seeing her sweating in her gym clothes now revives Neneko's memories from those days.
At the same time, Neneko's heart constricts as she remembers the beginning of her bittersweet love.

Wearing the green ribbon she got for finishing in first place on her chest, Mashiro meets up with Neneko before the two head to the school garden at the back during lunch break.

Most students decided to eat lunch in the air-conditioned classrooms or the gym, so there's no one else around.

However, since the two of them are in the shade, it's not too hot. It seems that the two of them are at a little-known spot.

Sitting with their backs against the school building, Neneko opens the bento box to see how her handiwork turned out.
Inside, there's tamagoyaki, fried prawns, cherry tomatoes, small pieces of hamburger steak, and other foods she found fitting for an athletics festival.

Mashiro eyes sparkle as she looks at the bento Neneko made early this morning.

"You really made a bento for me."

Mashiro takes several pictures of the bento, changing the angle and filters between each shot.
Seeing how incredibly happy Mashiro looks, Neneko feels glad from the bottom of her heart that she made this.

"...This is a first for me. Having someone make a bento for me during an athletics festival."

How should Neneko respond?
When she was little, Mashiro must have surely envied the other students.

What kind of thoughts did she have as she watched her friends eating bentos while surrounded by their families?
She must have struggled to hold back her tears.

"Mashiro-senpai... do you have a favorite food?"
"Hmm, let me think... Ah, I like bread. The soft and fluffy kind."
"In that case, I'll make bread for you next time."
"Doesn't that take a lot of time?"
"If it's for you, Mashiro-senpai, I'll make it over and over again until it's delicious."

After putting her smartphone in her pocket, Mashiro reaches her hand out to Neneko's.

When she gently holds Neneko's hand, Mashiro's hand feels warmer than usual because her body temperature has risen after all that running.

"...If you keep on saying things like that, you're going to give me the wrong idea, you know?"

(But it's not the wrong idea.)

Neneko loves Mashiro so she wants to make her happy.

As she contemplates whether or not she should tell her, her thoughts are interrupted by the growling of her stomach.

"...Shall we start eating?"
"Indeed..."

What horrible timing. Neneko curses her own body.
After putting their hands together, they move the food to small paper plates and begin eating.

The first thing that Mashiro takes is the fried prawns, so she might be especially fond of that.

Her chopsticks haven't gone for the cherry tomatoes at all, so perhaps she dislikes the smell of raw vegetables.

Without thinking, Neneko ended up observing her to learn her tastes.

"Tasty."

The sight of her moving one side dish after another into her mouth is truly lovely.
Even though Neneko made a little extra, the two of them finished everything in no time at all.

"Thank you for the meal, it was delicious."

As Neneko packs the box into her insulated bag, this time it's Mashiro's stomach that growls.

"Ah..."
"Maybe it's because you moved around so much."

As a vampire, Mashiro can't satiate her hunger unless she drinks blood.

No matter how much food she eats, she gains no nourishment and won't be able to go about her life with just that alone.

She always drinks some blood in the morning and at night, but since she's athletically gifted, she competed in numerous events. All that activity must have drained her stamina.

"Did you bring a blood pack?"
"They can't be stored at room temperature..."
"In that case..."

Gathering up her courage, Neneko begins to unbutton her polo shirt.
After undoing the top three buttons, she slides down her collar to reveal the side of her neck.

"D-do you want to drink this...?"

Knowing how difficult it will be if she ignores her hunger until nighttime, Mashiro doesn't answer immediately.
Neneko knows from Mashiro's wandering eyes that she's hesitating.

"Neko-chan..."
"I'm your partner, Mashiro-senpai... so I'm prepared to do this at any time."

After swallowing her saliva, Mashiro sits down in front of Neneko.
As Neneko lets her body fall further down with her back still against the wall, Mashiro gets on top of her.

"..."

She must be fighting the urge to drink her blood right this instant given how hungry she is.
Perhaps because she's still wavering between instinct and reason, her eyebrows are tightly furrowed.

"...No matter what happens, I'm not going to hate you."

Hearing that, Mashiro stares at Neneko in surprise. Shortly after, she seems to have made up her mind and her face moves closer.
Neneko closes her eyes and soon feels a warmth on her neck.

As Mashiro's lips suck against her skin with a slight smacking sound, Neneko holds back her voice threatening to leak out.

"...I'm going to start sucking now."

When Neneko nods, Mashiro's canines pierce her skin.
After the slight pain from that, Mashiro sucks the blood in a steady stream.

Neneko's body gradually begins to grow hotter from the occasional sound of Mashiro's heavy breathing.

"It's sweet."
"Um... does that mean you don't like it?"

Mashiro slowly shakes her head left and right.

"It's completely different from a blood pack... the taste is so sweet... that I can't help but want more."

There's no way Neneko wouldn't be happy to hear that from the person she loves.

She feels excited just by the thought that her blood is supporting Mashiro's life, but Mashiro wants even more.

"In that case, you can have more..."
"Your neck is going to get covered in marks."
"I don't mind if it's you, Mashiro-senpai..."

Mustering up all the courage she could, Neneko decides to say something a little bolder.
It's going to be embarrassing and she doesn't know how Mashiro will interpret it, but she still wants to convey these feelings.

"...As long as it's you, Mashiro-senpai, you can do anything you want to me."

Mashiro's lips close in once again, but this time they go for Neneko's mouth instead of her neck.

Once their lips touch, Mashiro gently puts her hand on Neneko's cheek.

"..."

Unable to hold back her euphoria, Neneko's cat ears and tail come out.

Since her tail is sticking out of her miniskirt, her panties must be in full view from behind.

"...Cute."

Neneko feels something soft pushing against her lips before the tip of Mashiro's tongue traces the small crevice between them.

As her cheeks heat up even further from embarrassment, her desire surges due to the softness of Mashiro's tongue.

She timidly opens her mouth and as expected, Mashiro's tongue pushes in.

"Ngh... mmm..."

After reservedly making contact with Neneko's tongue, Mashiro's tongue intertwines with Neneko's as they rub against each other.

Overwhelmed at feeling the heat and softness of someone else's tongue for the first time, Neneko's cheeks completely redden as she moves her own tongue as well.

The obscene sounds of their saliva mixing would leak out every now and then, stoking Neneko's shame even further.

"...Me-meow... Mashiro-senpai, that place is..."

Sensually gliding along Neneko's thigh, Mashiro's hand reaches Neneko's tail just above her panties.

Mashiro should know what happens if she touches Neneko there, yet...

Despite Neneko desperately shaking her head, Mashiro squeezes the base of Neneko's tail with a bit of force.

"Meee...meeeeeeeow!"

Each time Mashiro squeezes, a tingling sensation of pleasure courses through Neneko's body from her tail like an electric current.

As Neneko rubs her thighs together, their lips join once again, continuing the kiss from earlier.

"Mmm, ah..."

Neneko clings desperately to Mashiro's back as she lets out a high-pitched voice.

She definitely doesn't want Mashiro to notice her arousal seeping through her panties.

After all, she doesn't want Mashiro to think of her as a lewd girl who gets so delighted from this much.

The tongue that has been running wild in her mouth slowly parts.

Their faces are so close that the tip of their noses are slightly touching.

"...Why didn't you stop me?"
"...Ah."

This person must be afraid.
She has been rejected so much that she can't accept herself as a vampire.

She must be extremely confused by Neneko, who hasn't changed her behavior towards her even after discovering that she is a vampire.

Since she has never been treated like that by anyone before...
She's terrified of this unconditional love after all the cruel things that have been said to her.

"...I'm completely fine with that. That goes for having my blood sucked by you as well, Mashiro-senpai... It isn't scary at all. In fact, it feels pleasant... You're still extremely beautiful even as a vampire, Mashiro-senpai."

Lines of tears fall from her eyes which burned with so much passion just earlier.
Despite Neneko wiping away Mashiro's tears with her fingers multiple times, they keep on flowing out endlessly.

"...Whether you're a vampire or a human... You're still the extremely beautiful Mashiro-senpai that I admire."

Neneko really wants to confess her love for her, but she lacks the courage to do that now.

"If sucking blood makes you a monster, Mashiro-senpai, then what does that make me? I can turn into a cat."
"You're a catkin, Neko-chan. There's no way you could be a mons..."
"That goes for you too. You're not a monster either, Mashiro-senpai. You're a vampire."
"..."

As Neneko pulls her into a tight hug, Mashiro's trembling hands wrap around Neneko's back.

She must be able to hear how loud Neneko's heart is beating.

"I...I want to change. I've lived my life trying to hide these conspicuous looks I have from being a catkin..."
"Neko-chan..."
"So... why don't we try changing together? Doing it alone is scary... but if we're together, I'm sure we'll be able to accomplish something."
"...Mm."

Mashiro's voice quivered with pain as she answered.
She must have been in pain for a long time.
Unable to accept herself as a vampire, she lost her self-confidence.

Believing herself unworthy of love, she has become afraid of even being loved by others.

When Neneko buries her face in Mashiro's neck, she smells the faint scent of sweat.
Perhaps because it's Mashiro's scent, she almost becomes excited by that.

As she rubs Mashiro's trembling back, she ends up wishing she could have continued to feel Mashiro's heat for just a little bit longer.

Neneko walks alongside Mashiro, who is still wearing her jersey because she found it bothersome to change out of it.

Mashiro played a huge part in the evening's activities and got a lot of attention for acting as the anchor in the relay race between classes.

Neneko can't help but wonder why the star of the day is holding hands with her as they head home.

"Mashiro-senpai...?"
"Yes?"
"I'm not going to get lost, you know...?"

Her brain has given up on thinking about this wonderful event of returning home hand in hand with the person she loves.

She's so happy that the only possible explanation she could arrive at is that she is being treated like a child.

"What are you saying?"

Mashiro looks at her with an amused smile.
Her smiling face never fails to captivate Neneko's eyes.

"I'm holding your hand because I want to."
"W-why...?"
"That's a secret."

Mashiro lifts up the hand she's holding to her lips and kisses it on the back.

Naturally, Neneko's cheeks begin to glow red as she experiences a tingling sensation of happiness. It's a miracle her cat ears and tail haven't come out.

Their hands press together tightly as their fingers intertwine.
Neneko truly loves feeling Mashiro's body temperature like this.

"...Back in my family's home, I always admired a certain princess."

Neneko remembers the single picture book in the cupboard between the reference book and magazine.

"Well... given how hard things were, it couldn't be helped. I envied how the princess had someone who rescued her from her terrible home... but if I think about it now, I don't think that suits me at all."
"Eh...?"
"Isn't it too much like a heroine to just keep waiting for happiness to come to you? If I want happiness, it's fine for me to just grab it myself... That's what I think now thanks to you, Neko-chan. "

The setting sun illuminates her face, highlighting her mascara.

It might be due to her burgundy mascara, but she has a more tranquil aura than usual and looks extremely beautiful.

"...In fact, don't you think it's much cooler to become someone strong enough to protect the one most important to you so you can be happy together? Being a frail princess doesn't suit me."

With a bright smile, Mashiro's face seems to be colored more strongly in hope than sadness.

"Whether I'm a vampire or anything else, in the end, I still want to be happy."
"...Let's do our best together."

Neneko squeezes back on Mashiro's hand and returns a smile.

Despite still being scared, Mashiro summoned the courage to take her first step.

Inspired by her tenacity, Neneko is itching to start something as well.

For some reason, Mashiro wants to face forward now.
Perhaps just like Neneko, she had always wanted someone to encourage her.

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Neneko has always felt out of her element in beauty salons.
The dazzling atmosphere and stylish staff intimidated her.

All the other customers seem so lively that Neneko feels completely out of place.

That's why she has kept her hair long this whole time.

She's not particularly fixated on this hairstyle. She simply wanted to reduce the number of times she had to come to these places.

Truth be told, she has always longed to have a bob cut that's just a little above her shoulders.

"How would you like your hair done today?"

Neneko looks at her reflection in the mirror. After adeptly putting the white cloth over her, the stylist kindly asked her preferences. Today, Neneko summoned the courage to visit this beauty salon.

This is the place her sister often visits. As usual, she can't get used to the stylish atmosphere, but Neneko does her best to endure.

"...Please cut my hair into a short bob... just a bit above my shoulders."
"That's quite a monumental decision. Very well."

Neneko looks at the mirror as her hair becomes shorter and shorter.

She does not dislike fashion. Her desire for a shorter hairstyle grew each time as she saw how lively actresses and magazine models with those hairstyles looked. If she cut her own hair shorter, would the world she sees change? Would even her feelings change?

She had always yearned to find out, but due to not being fond of beauty salons, she had never taken the plunge.

More than anything, she didn't want her face to be seen.

She hated people staring at her dual-colored eyes, so she always found having long hair useful for hiding them.

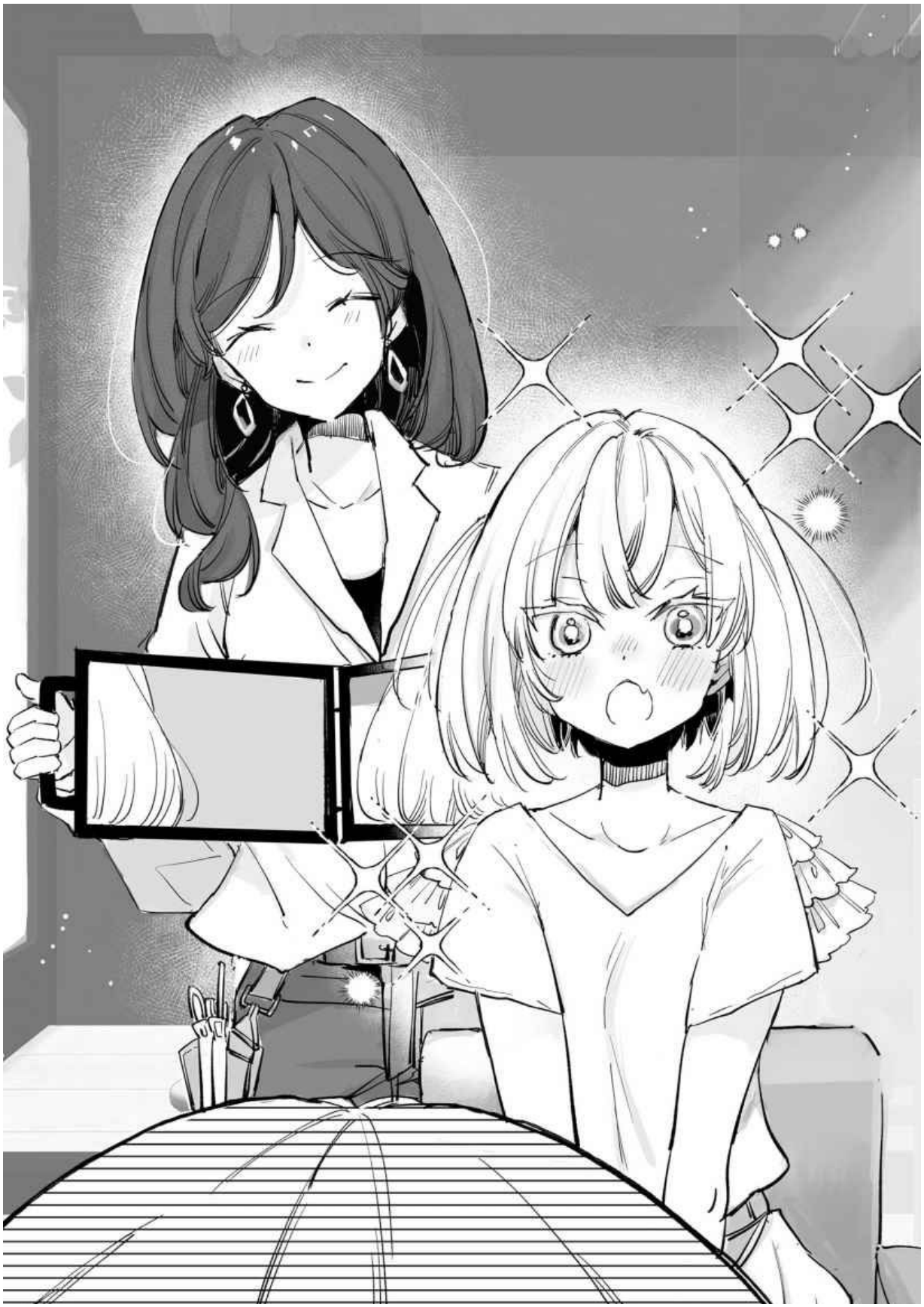
The long hair that she has used to hide herself gets cut bit by bit with the rhythmic sound of the scissors.

"How do you like it? Since your face is small, a bob cut suits you."

The stylist smiles as she holds up a mirror to show Neneko what her hair looks like from behind.

With her haircut complete, Neneko becomes thrilled to see that it matches how she always envisioned it.
She's not confident it looks good on her, but she has the hairstyle that she always admired.

Her neck feels cooler and she definitely doesn't dislike this invigorating sensation.



After leaving the beauty salon, she heads for the nearby optometrist's.

It seems she can order online, but her sister advised her that it would be better to go in person and get an examination for her first time.

"What can I do for you today?"
"I want to get a prescription for contacts..."

Her heart pounds as she sits in the waiting room filling out a medical questionnaire. Her excitement wins over her nervousness.

She accomplished two things that she hesitated over for many years.

Even though all she did was go to the beauty salon and optometrist, she strangely feels a tremendous sense of accomplishment.

After returning home and catching her breath, Neneko takes a look at herself using the hand mirror her sister gave to her for her birthday last year.

She's no longer wearing her glasses and her formerly chest-length hair has been cut until it's just above her shoulders.

The living room carpet has been switched for the summer season so it feels light and pleasant to touch.

With summer coming, it will be easier for her to dry her hair now that it's shorter.

"This doesn't look weird, does it?"

Neneko isn't used to wearing UV-blocking contacts so she feels slightly uncomfortable.
Putting them on and removing them will be a struggle, but that's the effort she must make to be stylish.

While being somewhat restless at how differently her neck feels, she hears the sound of the front door opening. Mashiro has returned home from school.

"Welcome back."
"I'm ho... Neko-chan?"
"Um... Ho-how do I look?"

Momentarily astonished by Neneko's new appearance, Mashiro answers confidently after Neneko timidly asks for her impressions.

"It's super cute!"
"Re-really...?"

Her tension alleviates for only a moment. Due to both her joy and relief, cat ears sprout out of her head.

When she quickly tries to cover them with her hands, Mashiro laughs in amusement.

"Are you that happy to be praised?"

It's a given that she feels happy.
After she mustered up the courage to change her image, the person she's in love with called her cute.

While performing a small fist pump inside her heart, Neneko breaks into a smile.

That night, they had Napolitan for dinner. As Neneko washes the dishes after their meal, Mashiro suddenly appears in the kitchen after cleaning the bathtub.

As Neneko discreetly observes her movements, Mashiro takes out a certain item just as expected.

"...Mashiro-senpai."
"What's wrong?"
"...I'm banning blood packs."

Mashiro stares blankly at Neneko, not really understanding. While she's dazed, Neneko snatches the blood pack from her hand.

Mashiro lets go without any resistance.

"...Why would you drink a stranger's blood when you have me right here?"

Neneko decides to display her feelings instead of hiding her jealousy so she gently pulls Mashiro towards her.

Her heart pounds as she buries her face in Mashiro's shoulder.

Mashiro's clothes share the scent of the same fabric softener as Neneko's, another reminder that the two are living together.

"...Are you jealous?"
"Because... even though there's a background check, there's no way to tell

whose blood that is, right...? Though more importantly, I..."
"Do you want me to suck your blood?"

Hearing her own feelings put into words, her bold voice from earlier fades as shame takes over.

After Mashiro whispers that into her ear, Neneko doesn't deny it and simply nods.
Mashiro puts her fingers on Neneko's ear after brushing aside her short hair and then begins tracing Neneko's neck with her index finger.

To endure her excitement, Neneko lightly bites down on her lower lip.

"...It might have been better to keep your hair long."
"...Are you saying that short hair doesn't look good on me?"
"With your hair short... everyone will be able to see your hickeys and bite marks."
"..."

Mashiro buries her head into the same spot she bit into before while Neneko is still startled.
After sucking on the side of her neck a few times, Mashiro's tongue moves to Neneko's collarbone.

After tracing the notch, Mashiro's tongue moves up and licks Neneko's lips for only a moment.

"Ngh..."

Seeing Neneko's shoulders jump, Mashiro smiles in delight.

Neneko's heartbeat quickens in anticipation as she wonders where Mashiro will lick her next. Mashiro moves to the opposite side of where she sucked on Neneko earlier and begins dropping kisses on the side of her neck.

After sucking with enough force to leave a dark hickey, Mashiro finally pierces Neneko's skin with her canines.

"...Ah"

The pain of having her skin pierced is becoming addictive.

Neneko revels in delight as she feels her blood being sucked.

When she thinks about Mashiro living off of her blood, she ends up feeling excited since it's like she's dying Mashiro in her own color.

She can't help but love Mashiro seeking her blood.

"...Ugh, Mashiro-senpai."
"Does it hurt...?"
"That's not it..."

Unable to hold them back, Neneko's cat ears and tail appear.
Since she's feeling so excited about having her blood sucked by Mashiro, she couldn't control her emotions.

Even though Mashiro is just sucking her blood, Neneko ended up getting turned on.

"...Is it tasty?"
"...Unbelievably so."
"Then please drink even more..."

Seeing this as her chance to make an appeal, Neneko rubs her body against Mashiro.
Feeling Mashiro's bulging chest against her own body, Neneko's heartbeat goes out of control.

"...Please keep drinking my blood until you're full."

When Mashiro's canines pierce the same spots once again, Neneko hugs her back tightly as Mashiro frantically drinks her blood.

Even though she's just getting her blood sucked, Neneko's excitement and delight are out of this world.

With the smacking sound of lips, Mashiro's mouth leaves Neneko's neck.
Some of Neneko's blood sticks to the edge of Mashiro's lips.

She looks far too beautiful like that.

The mysterious aura surrounding her now further accentuates her charms.

Even though it has been thirty minutes since she woke up, Neneko has not moved from her spot.

With Mashiro hugging her from behind, Neneko's cat ears have been exposed and twitching since earlier.

Her tail has wrapped itself around Mashiro's leg but since she's deep asleep, Mashiro hasn't noticed at all.

Neneko glances over to see Mashiro's pretty sleeping face right next to her shoulder.

Her face is close enough that Neneko just needs to bring her face a bit closer to kiss her, but she quickly looks away.

"...Mashiro-senpai."

Despite Neneko calling her name, she doesn't wake up.
Even though Mashiro doesn't usually toss and turn, today she ended up hugging Neneko from behind in her sleep.

Since she's sleeping on her side, her chest has been pressing against Neneko's back. In this situation, there's no way Neneko would be able to keep her cool so that's why her cat ears and tail ended up coming out.

"Neko-chan..."

Hearing Mashiro call out her name while sleeptalking, Neneko gets excited. Following that, Mashiro puts her head against Neneko's neck and rubs her forehead against it.

Every time Mashiro's hair touches Neneko's neck, she can't stop her feelings from stirring.

"...Ah...mm."

Even though it's still early in the morning, Neneko is getting into a weird mood.

When Mashiro slightly twists her body, Neneko's tail gets pulled along and the base of her tail gets stimulated, sending a tremendous amount of pleasure coursing through her body.

"Meeow..!"

She lets out a loud voice as her body shivers.
Neneko covers her mouth with her hands to not wake Mashiro. This situation is dangerous. Even though she knows that she must not, her body craves more pleasure.

Perhaps Mashiro isn't feeling comfortable. She continues to shift her body, stimulating Neneko's tail each time she does.

"...Mee-meeeow...meow..."

With her hands covering her mouth, Neneko desperately tries to hold back her voice but some of it still leaks out.

Just as her body is heating up more and more, her eyes widen when she suddenly feels something sucking on her neck.

"...Mashiro-senpai."
"Good morning."
"You were awake!?"

When she looks back, she sees Mashiro grinning.

"I was wondering when you would notice... You're so cute with your cat ears that I've been watching you this whole time."
"...Please don't tease me."

Does that mean she heard everything earlier? Before Neneko starts sulking out of shame, Mashiro climbs on top of her.

"...Ah."

Having Mashiro push her down like this early in the morning feels extremely immoral.

"Can I suck your blood?"

There's no way Neneko would refuse a request from the person she loves. After she nods, Mashiro puts her face to the side of Neneko's neck.

Perhaps feeling hungry, she doesn't tease Neneko today. She sinks her teeth in immediately and begins sucking.

"Ngh..."

The moment Mashiro's teeth penetrate her skin, Neneko lets out a slight cry of pain. As if to comfort her, Mashiro tenderly rubs Neneko's cat ears.

Neneko isn't sure why, but ever since Mashiro started sucking her blood, it feels like Mashiro has been gradually increasing their physical intimacy every day.

At first, Neneko thought Mashiro was just picking a spot to suck from when she kissed her neck, but lately, Mashiro has even started kissing her collarbone and lips.

Since Neneko doesn't dislike it, she has allowed Mashiro to do as she pleases.

Things may have been gradually escalating because Neneko feels so happy and comfortable being touched by Mashiro that she hasn't said anything.

Even if all of that is just her imagination, Neneko feels extremely happy.

"Careful."

Mashiro grabs onto Neneko's shoulder after she begins squirming from how Mashiro's fingers would occasionally touch her nape.

"Sorry..."
"If you end up hitting the curling iron, you're going to get burned, Neko-chan."

Being told to keep still, Neneko tries to concentrate and brace her body.
After fixing Neneko's bed hair with the dryer, Mashiro put two sectioning clips on Neneko and is now curling her hair.

Neneko uses the small mirror placed on top of the table to watch Mashiro work.
She deftly turns the curling iron and quickly styles Neneko's hair before her eyes.

"Mashiro-senpai, you're really good at this."
"Mm. I'm quite handy when it comes to most things."

Mashiro laughs as she explains that she's a jack of all trades and master of none, but Neneko finds it charming how she can do so many things flawlessly.

"Which is easier to curl hair with, a flat iron or a curling iron?"
"It depends on the person. For me, I prefer to use a curling iron... but if you want to be extra cautious about not getting burned, a flat iron is safer."

After having her bangs loosely curled, they seem softer than usual.
With some hair oil as the finishing touch, the curls become even softer and cuter.

"Alright, that looks cute."
"Thank you. Are you sure you don't want to come along?"
"Sisters should enjoy some time alone once in a while."
"I'll bring something back for you."

Neneko has made plans today to meet with her older sister, Neneka. Since Mashiro knew that, she took the time to help style Neneko's hair.

The hair oil used at the end is not Neneko's own, but the one that Mashiro uses. Mashiro's hair oil is slightly heavier and has a faint citrus scent immediately after it's applied.

Happy to have this scent that disappears so quickly coming from herself, Neneko takes some time to savor the smell.

Normally, she would walk down the street while looking downwards to keep her face hidden, but thanks to Mashiro helping her look cuter, she has a feeling she'll be able to keep her head held a bit higher today.

In front of the ticket gate of a busy station, Neneko spots her older sister immediately among the crowd. Even as her younger sister, Neneko recognizes Neneka's distinctive looks as attractive and secretly feels proud of her sister.

Of course, she would never tell Neneka directly since it would be embarrassing, but she loves her older sister who dotes on her.

When Neneko rushes over and calls out to her, Neneka seems a little surprised.

"Your hair looks cute. The same goes for your contacts."

Although it feels slightly embarrassing to have those changes pointed out, she smiles back at her sister.

"Love truly is amazing."
"Eh...?"
"It made even someone as reserved as you want to show off your cuteness."
"Is that so...?"
"Did you do your hair yourself?"
"Mashiro-senpai did it for me."
"You're still calling her senpai? You two are lovers now."

Now that she mentions it, it might seem strange for them to address each other as they have considering that they should be acting like lovers.

Neneko attended the same middle school as Mashiro for only one year, so there isn't much reason for her to still be calling Mashiro senpai.

As for Mashiro, the name "Neko-chan" is the nickname of her friend's younger sister that Aoi, Karen, and her other friends also use.

If Neneko tells Mashiro that she wants to call her "Mashiro-san", what kind of face would she make?
Would she oblige if Neneko asks Mashiro to call her Neneko?

Inside the store filled with fluffy cats, all the customers' faces are beaming with smiles. All the people who come here are cat lovers so this must be paradise for them.

Among all of that, Neneko and her sister Neneka are talking to the cat that has been here the longest.

"Have there been any problems here?"
"None at all! Everyone here is kind and this place is cozy."

Judging from the cat's smile, that must be true.
All the cats look healthy with a well-groomed coat of fur.

"Make sure to let us know if anything happens."
"Of course! Ah, that lady over there brought a snack..."
"You can go ahead."

The long-haired cat happily trots over to the young woman holding a snack.

The two of them didn't come to the cat cafe to play with cats. They are here to keep an eye out and make sure that there aren't any cats being mistreated.

Although these concept cafes are meant to be havens for cats, there are some aiming to exploit cats and don't provide proper care and living conditions. It is the job of catkins to protect cats from such people.

More than half of the catkin population belongs to groups that protect cats and bring happiness to the cats who can't speak for themselves like catkins.

"By the way, Neneko, has your first heat arrived yet?'

Neneko shakes her head.
The heat cycle which puts their bodies in a state of arousal typically comes during spring and summer.

They happen about two to four times a year and last for seven days.

One way to end it quicker is to entertain those urges until their bodies are satisfied, so her sister has been nagging her to find a partner.

"I see. Still, I'm relieved. It's quite painful to try and go through that all by yourself... so I'm glad that you have Mashiro with you now."
"...Yes, that's right."

Her sister's words made her hesitate a little.

The two of them are just pretending to be lovers and aren't actually dating.

Neneko has been enjoying life with Mashiro so much that she hasn't thought about it lately, but what will she do once her first heat arrives?

Since she has never experienced it, she doesn't know how tough it will actually be.
Things will be fine if she can overcome it on her own, but if she can't endure it, what will she do?

"Ah, I just remembered. Can you fill in for me on the next cat conference?"
"Eh?"
"I didn't do too well on my test the other day, so I have to take extra lessons..."

Neneka puts her palms together and pleads with her. Since Neneko has no other plans, she quickly agrees.

The cat conference is a meeting where the various cats who lead a district gather. Most of them tend to be quite stubborn since that's pretty much a requirement to become a district leader.

The agenda is to report on any recent problems and signs of danger. A catkin family is put in charge of overseeing cat conferences for a region and the Nekonoyama family has been assigned District 1 through District 8.

Surprisingly, the calico cat that Neneko feels indebted to is the leader of District 3.

It's a mystery how she managed to climb to the top despite her kind nature.

The calico cat is the only district leader with such an agreeable personality, all the other cats are strong-willed and unique in their own ways.

Although she agreed right away, Neneko becomes a bit uneasy about whether she can truly handle the responsibility.

What would a passerby think of this scene?
In a dim back alley, eight cats and a white-haired girl who looks like a high schooler are sitting in a ring.

To make matters worse, anyone who isn't a catkin will only hear *"Meow meow"* from the cats, so Neneko will definitely appear strange for talking to

them.

While thinking that, Neneko desperately tries to avoid eye contact with the tabby cat from District 4 who has been glaring at her the whole time.

"Today, Neneko-sama will be acting as the conference chair."

The calico cat speaks with her usual gentle tone. Her demeanor has always helped put Neneko at ease.
Since Neneko came here today instead of her older sister Neneka, the other cats are wary and assessing her.

It is customary for catkins to lead these meetings.
Since long ago, catkins have taken action to protect their fellow cats.

These cats can't turn into humans or communicate with humans so they are more susceptible to personal injuries and illnesses.

Catkins have continued their mission of protecting them from such things since the ancient times of Neneko's ancestors.

"Hmph, what can a little girl like this do?"

When the male tabby cat from District 4 insults Neneko, the black cat from District 1 responds with fangs bared and eyes widened.

"How dare you speak like that to Neneko-sama...!"
"I intend to find out if she's capable."
"How rude! Apologize to Neneko-sama immediately!"

Seeing the two of them getting more and more heated, Neneko feels the urge to sigh.
She prays in her heart that no one will peer into this back alley after hearing them.

"Calm down. Instead of talking about me, has anyone run into any problems lately? Have you all been getting enough food?"
"No problems here. Although... there has been a dog wandering around my turf."

"A dog? Is it a stray...?"
"I've only seen it a few times, but it looks far too well-kept to be a stray... I've seen that type of dog accompanying humans before, so I don't think it is one."

The brown tabby from District 6 tilts their head.
Unlike free-roaming cats, there are basically no stray dogs in Tokyo these days.

They apparently existed in the past, but if any are found nowadays, they get taken to an animal shelter. There's a possibility that it's a dog who ran away from home and got lost.

Neneko's heart tightens as she imagines the sad fate of a lost pet dog.

"Has the dog been picking fights?"
"No. It hasn't taken any of my food either... but it's kind of creepy."
"Creepy? In what way?"
"It's far too calm. It's a dog that doesn't act like a dog at all."

If the dog runs into any other cats, they might get into a fight and injure each other.

Neneko will make a trip to District 6 and assess the situation. With that, the brown tabby's report ends.

After that, the other district leaders don't take their turns in any order and just scramble to go next. Unaccustomed to leading these meetings, Neneko ends up feeling exhausted by the time she leaves.

Neneko puts the premeasured ingredients into a bowl and mixes everything together.

She's making some Chigiri Pan *(torn bread)* for Mashiro before she returns from school since she loves bread.

Neneko looks at the beginner-friendly recipe that doesn't require a bread machine she found on her smartphone as she puts her all into this new endeavor.

After kneading the dough and shaping it, she gives it some time to ferment before baking it in the preheated oven.

She's putting time and effort into this Chigiri Pan solely for the purpose of making Mashiro happy.
While the bread is baking, she prepares salad and stew until Mashiro returns.

She was so immersed in making the bread that the sun had already set before she realized it.

"Welcome back, Mashiro-senpai."
"I'm home... Hm?"

Noticing the smell, Mashiro breaks into a smile when she recognizes it.

"That smells good."
"I tried baking bread."
"So you remembered."

What does Mashiro think about the fact that Neneko remembered her favorite food and made it?
Does she think it's strange for her to go so far just for someone she happens to be living with?

After carefully arranging the freshly baked bread on a plate, they have dinner a bit earlier than usual.
Neneko can't help stealing glances at Mashiro as she takes bites out of the fluffy baked bread.

"It's delicious... You're an amazing cook, Neko-chan. Neneka's skills don't even come close to this."
"My dad was busy with work and onee-chan had club activities and other things going on, so I did the housework. Since... I don't have any friends."

She didn't go out, didn't have any friends, and only played with cats in her free time.
That's why she couldn't help looking forward to the times when her older sister would bring Mashiro over.

She was the same in middle school, though her sister and Mashiro didn't become friends until Mashiro entered high school.

Right after Mashiro graduated from middle school and Neneko thought she would never see her again, her heart almost stopped from shock when her sister came home with Mashiro one day.

"There are plenty of people out there who will want to be friends with you, Neko-chan."
"Why do you think that...?"
"It will be okay. I guarantee it."

After finishing her meal, Neneko heads for the bathroom but Mashiro grabs her arm as she's passing by.
Seeing the slight heat in Mashiro's eyes, she understood what she wanted immediately.

"...Is it okay if I have your blood first?"

When Neneko nods, Mashiro happily spreads her arms to invite Neneko in.
Neneko timidly gets closer and Mashiro pulls her in, wrapping her in her body's warmth.

At such a close range, Mashiro traces Neneko's neck with an exquisitely tantalizing touch.

"...I'm sorry for making your beautiful skin like this."

Neneko's neck is covered in marks from having her blood sucked. There's so much that the only way to hide them is to wear a muffler or something else to cover her entire neck.

These are the proof of Mashiro's bond with her, so every time Neneko sees them in the mirror, she becomes filled with affection.

"As long as it's you, Mashiro-senpai, you can put as many on me as you like..."

After Neneko's shy reply, Mashiro snatches a kiss without any warning.

Her lips feel soft and tender.
No matter how many times she kisses her, Neneko can't get used to it.
Before she knows it, her cat ears and tail come out.

Normally, Mashiro would have started touching her cat ears and teasing her at this point. However, Mashiro's eyes look serious today.

"W-why did you kiss me just now...?"
"Neko-chan."

Mashiro doesn't answer her question, she simply calls her name.
The warmth of Mashiro's lips still lingers on Neneko's own, causing her lips to quiver slightly.

"Do friends... also kiss each other...?"
"...They do."
"Really...?"

Neneko doesn't have any friends so she has no idea if that's the truth.
Even though she doesn't think that's the case, she can't completely dismiss the idea.

The pounding of her heart becomes more intense. She's anticipating something from Mashiro.

"...Then, onee-chan... Aoi-san and Karen-san as well... have you kissed any of them...?"
"I've only done it with you, Neko-chan."
"...Why? This isn't the first time either... Why did you kiss me all the other times...?"
"...Special friends kiss each other."

Her face is so close that the tips of their noses are touching.
Like always, there's not a single blemish to be found on her beautiful skin.

"...Have you experienced a kiss that feels good?"
"...Like the one you did before, Mashiro-senpai...?"

On the day of the athletics festival, Mashiro gave her a deep kiss after she finished sucking her blood.
That first deep kiss felt so sensational that Neneko had trouble breathing afterward.

"...It was my first time being kissed like that. I could taste the blood."

A kiss like that can only be experienced with a vampire.
It's quite a strange feeling to taste your own blood during a kiss.

Mashiro puts her fingers on Neneko's chin and adjusts the angle of Neneko's head as she brings her own closer.
Even though Neneko knows what's going to happen, she pretends not to notice and shuts her eyes.

Neneko is starving to be kissed by the person she loves.

"Nnmm..."

Mashiro's tongue breaks into Neneko's half-open mouth.
Their tongues entangle and then Mashiro's tongue traces Neneko's teeth.

As soon as that happens, Neneko's body shivers in pleasure. While intoxicated by pleasure, she wonders if it's appropriate for her to feel this good in such a place.

"Hmm...mm...agh."

Even when their saliva drips down from the edge of their lips, Mashiro doesn't break the kiss and continues seeking Neneko.
Neneko places her hands on Mashiro's shoulders, pressing their bodies closer together as she savors this deep kiss.

Despite Mashiro's lips slowly parting, the aftertaste still leaves Neneko feeling a bit hazy.

"Why...?"
"...I guess to overwrite the last one?"

Did she pity Neneko because her first kiss tasted like blood?
Neneko doesn't know why Mashiro kissed her like that to start with.

In the beginning, Mashiro did it because she found Neneko's reactions amusing.
She lightly kissed Neneko to make her embarrassed so that her cat ears and tail would pop out.

However, even with Neneko's cat ears and tail exposed at the moment, Mashiro isn't looking at them. She's more focused on Neneko's lips despite being a hardcore cat lover.

Are there really friends that share a first kiss?

"I'm going to start sucking now."

Mashiro buries her face in Neneko's neck once again and after a prickling pain, begins sucking blood.
Neneko gets her hopes up as her hands hold onto the hem of Mashiro's clothes.

Perhaps there's a chance that Mashiro has become a little more conscious of Neneko.
Is it possible that her feelings have changed from before?

Hearing the occasional heavy breathing leak out from Mashiro, Neneko's heart beats faster as she finds herself drawn even more to Mashiro.

Up until now, Neneko should have been content with just looking at her. Before she noticed, she had begun to entertain far-fetched the idea that Mashiro might be able to return her feelings someday.

After coming to District 6, an area she rarely visits, she began looking for the rumored dog.
She's here to find the calm dog that doesn't seem to be a stray brought up at the cat conference the other day.

A cat that happens to be walking down the road greets her. After returning a slight bow, Neneko continues moving.
She has been searching for a while but hasn't found any dogs that match the description. She's contemplating giving up when she notices something.

"...Huh?"

A petite fluffy dog walks with nimble steps in front of Neneko.
This breed is known for its cuteness. It's a Pomeranian.

"Eh, a Pomeranian...?"

Neneko looks around but there's no one else here. It doesn't seem to be on a leashless walk with its owner.
There's no way a Pomeranian could be a stray, so it must be either lost or abandoned.

If it ran away from home, then Neneko wants to return it to its owner. If it has been abandoned, then Neneko wants to help it find a safe home.

She rushes over and calls out to the Pomeranian from behind.

"Um..."

The Pomeranian looks up at Neneko with its round eyes.

Neneko can converse with no other animals except cats.

When she gently picks up the Pomeranian, she's met with no resistance.
The Pomeranian is wagging its fluffy tail. It seems friendly and used to humans.

Its expressive dark eyes are so lovely that they can win over just about anyone.

"Are you the one...?"

The Pomeranian tilts its head in confusion.
It's almost like they're communicating with each other. That adorable gesture makes Neneko's chest tighten even more.

"Neneko-sama."

Hearing someone call out to her from behind, she turns around to find the brown tabby that's the leader of this district.

Seeing the Pomeranian that Neneko is holding, the brown tabby eagerly gets closer.

"Neneko-sama, that's the one. That's the fluffy dog that's been wandering around my turf."
"It certainly does seem like a pet. I don't see a collar or anything though..."
"I don't see it every day. Just where could it have come from...?"
"I'll take it home with me. It looks like it got injured here."

There's a bit of blood coming out from the Pomeranian's front paw. It might have stepped on a glass or something similar while it was walking.
It didn't seem bothered by the injury while it was walking so it probably doesn't hurt, but Neneko is still worried.

"Indeed... that looks painful."
"I'll treat the injury and see if I can find its owner."
"I'll entrust the matter to you."

After adjusting how she's holding the Pomeranian, Neneko heads back to Mashiro's apartment.
Since she has only played with cats, the feeling of a dog's fur is quite new to her.

The Pomeranian began to thrash about along the way, so Neneko felt completely exhausted by the time she reached Mashiro's apartment.
Neneko doesn't exercise, so her grip strength might have declined along with her stamina.

While thinking she should start exercising a little, Neneko brings the Pomeranian to the bathroom.
Its fur isn't dirty, but since it has been outside so long, Neneko thought it would be better to give it a wash.

In case of any splashing water when the Pomeranian struggles, Neneko takes off all her clothes and enters the shower together with the

Pomeranian.
When she gently pours warm water over the Pomeranian, it begins twisting its body in displeasure.

"Hey, what's wrong?"

It seems to be struggling a lot more than it did on the way here. If Neneko opens the bathroom door, it will surely make a dash for the front door.

Wanting to avoid the Pomeranian's ire, Neneko stops the water from the shower to try and appease it.

"Calm down."

She picks up the Pomeranian that's running around the bathroom, but it still struggles to get away.

"Don't move, Pome-chan."
"Cut it out already!"

Suddenly, Neneko hears another person's voice.
At the same time, the Pomeranian's thrashing causes Neneko to lose her balance and she winces in pain as her back hits the floor.

It feels like there's a human on top of her.

(Eh...?)

Neneko's eyes widen in her surprise once she sees the girl pushing down on her.

"...Ah."

That fluffy and adorable Pomeranian suddenly turned into a human girl.

Neneko twists her body to escape, but the girl covers her mouth and has blocked her escape route.

"Mm!! Mm! Mm!"
"Stop struggling! Also, you have to keep what you saw just now a secret!"
"Mm! Mm!"

Neneko tries to reply, but that's all she can manage with her mouth covered.

This is her first time seeing it, but there's no mistake.

This girl can turn into a dog. She's a dogkin.
Just like catkins, dogkins live while keeping their existence a secret. She must be distraught that Neneko witnessed her transformation.

However, Neneko is also panicking because she's pinned down by a naked girl and has her mouth sealed while she herself is also naked.

Just as she begins to cry from how hard it is to breathe, the bathroom door swings open.

"Neko-chan? I heard a loud noise just... huh?"

Should this timing be considered good or bad?
Mashiro said she would be home late today since she would be hanging out with Neneko's sister and the others.

Due to the commotion earlier, Neneko didn't notice that Mashiro had returned home. Mashiro happened to come home early and ended up seeing Neneko naked.
Neneko's whole body becomes dyed in shame and the girl on top of her quickly gets off.

"What are you doing!?"

After glaring at the girl sharply, Mashiro stands in front of Neneko to protect her.
As Neneko tries to curl into a ball in desperation to hide her body, she realizes that Mashiro misunderstood something.

Mashiro looks so enraged right now that she seems ready to bite the girl.

"Who are you and what were you trying to do to Neko-chan?"
"Huh? That's my line. Who are you and where is this place!?"
"You're the trespasser here! I'm calling the police."
"Police!? Wait just a minute..."

When Mashiro got home, she found the person she is living with completely naked and pinned down by another naked girl. To make matters worse, Neneko's mouth was sealed and she was crying.

Neneko was crying because she was having trouble breathing, but Mashiro wouldn't be aware of that so how must the scene have looked to her?

Even now, it feels like Mashiro is ready to explode so Neneko rushes to intervene.

"You've got the wrong idea, Mashiro-senpai!"
"...Then is this someone you know, Neko-chan?"
"I don't know her, but... umm... I brought home an injured Pomeranian... and..."
"What does that story have to do with this girl?"

Mashiro furrows her eyebrows at the seemingly unconnected story.

Seeing this, the girl at the edge of the bathroom glares at Neneko.

"She's the one who took me here while I was just out for a walk! Why are you making me out to be the villain here!"

The girl looks close to tears as she shouts.
Even though Neneko didn't realize the situation earlier, she can sympathize with the anxiety of suddenly being taken somewhere.

"I-I'm sorry..."
"Why are you the one apologizing, Neko-chan?"
"I've had enough of this. Lend me some clothes, I want to go home!!"

As they shout at each other, their voices echo in this small bathroom. While desperately trying to hide her naked body from the girl she loves, Neneko secretly sighs at this chaotic situation.

After changing into Mashiro's loungewear, the girl pouts while sitting on the floor and clasping her knees.

She's taller than Neneko and seems to be around the same height as Mashiro. She also has a mature atmosphere similar to Mashiro's. Her light brown hair looks as soft as a Pomeranian.

She's sulking like a cat forced into an unfamiliar environment and twiddling her toes. She hasn't said anything since earlier.

"...I want to drink cocoa."
"We don't have any."

The one who coldly shot down her request after she finally started talking is Mashiro, who's still clad in the icy aura from earlier.

Neneko had planned to lend her own clothes to the girl, but Mashiro beat her to the punch and offered her own.

Neneko thought that meant Mashiro's wariness had lifted, but that didn't seem to be the case.

"Then how about orange juice?"
"We don't have that either."
"Then what do you have?"
"Blood packs. Stop acting like a child."
"..."

Feeling sorry for the girl who looks like she's close to tears, Neneko takes out some apple juice from the fridge and offers it to her.

The way she gently accepts it with both her hands is more childish than one would expect from her looks.
Despite her mature appearance, her words and actions are childish.

"...Would you happen to be a dogkin by any chance?"
"...Are you a catkin?"
"Eh? How do you..."
"You were talking to a stray cat earlier. Though I'm a dogkin so I couldn't follow the conversation..."

As expected, she's a dogkin who can talk to dogs and take on the shape of one.
She panicked after suddenly being taken by a stranger to an unknown place.

Neneko also panicked when she got taken by Mashiro back into this apartment in her cat form, despite knowing Mashiro. At that time, she kept the fact that she's a catkin a secret... Though they may be of different races, hiding their true identity from society is something catkins and dogkins have in common.

"What exactly were you doing outside?"
"I was taking a walk... When I take walks in that form, a bunch of people call me cute and pet me, so..."
"Did you want attention?"
"I'd just be alone at home..."

Somehow, Neneko can sympathize with the girl as she whispers to herself.

"...A Pomeranian walking outside all alone is going to attract a lot of attention. If you're unlucky, you might get taken to an animal shelter, you know?"
"I'm sorry... I don't have any friends, so I got lonely..."

The girl shrinks back at Neneko's words and replies in a tearful voice. She must be someone who can't stand being alone.

Neneko sees her former self in this girl. She used to always play with cats since she had no friends.

Neneko started distancing herself from others because she didn't like people's comments about her appearance, but even she couldn't help feeling lonely.

She was terrified of interacting with others, but those lonely days were difficult to get through.

Neneko feels Mashiro gently tapping her back.
When she turns around, she sees an apologetic look on Mashiro's face. It looks like the misunderstanding has finally been resolved.

Having an idea of what Mashiro wants to tell her, Neneko squeezes out some courage.

"...In that case, I'll be your friend."
"Eh...?"
"I'm a catkin... and I don't have any friends so I don't know if I'll be any good at it, but..."

The girl's teary face changes into a delighted smile right before Neneko's eyes.
She holds Neneko's hands tightly and then hugs her.

"Thank you...!"
"So please stop walking around outside as a Pomeranian."
"Okay! My name is Inui Lulu!"
"I'm Nekonoyama Neneko. Let's get along from..."

Neneko immediately freezes when she feels something soft on her cheek.
Despite Mashiro finally calming down, Neneko suddenly senses Mashiro's aura darkening again from behind her.

"In that case, see you later, Neneko-onee-chan!"

Ignoring Neneko's dumbfounded expression, Lulu happily waves her hands now that she's in high spirits. She mentions that she'll return the clothes another day.

Neneko didn't feel embarrassed since that innocent kiss was reminiscent of children playing around. She was just surprised by the abruptness of it.

Is that what Mashiro meant back when she said friends kiss each other?

"Lulu-chan is like a typhoon."

She suddenly appeared, tossed them around, and returned home.
When she smiles at Mashiro, Neneko gets a kiss on her cheek instead of a reply.

Mashiro kisses her in the exact same spot as Lulu from earlier.

Since it happened so suddenly, Neneko couldn't stop her cat ears and tail from popping out.
Despite her stiff body, her tail is swaying. Mashiro smiles as she gently grabs the base of her tail.

"...Please let go."
"If you move, I'm going to play with your tail."
"Uh..."

If she does that, Neneko won't be able to endure the pleasure.
Forced to remain still, she has no choice but to let Mashiro steal another kiss.

This time, the kiss is on her lips instead of her cheek.
Neneko lets out a passionate moan as Mashiro's tongue makes its way into her mouth.

Mashiro begins rubbing Neneko's nape in tandem with the kiss and in no time at all, Neneko is at her mercy.

"Nn, ngh... meow, ah."

The fingers touching her nape slide down to her back before sensually tracing her flank.

Neneko twitches at this irresistible sensation and Mashiro tightens her grip on Neneko's tail.

"Ngh!? Me.. Meow..."

Immediately, a tingly pleasure courses through her body, robbing her of all her strength.
When she leans into Mashiro, she gets pulled into a tight hug.

"M-Mashiro-senpai...?"
"...again."
"What did you say...?"
"Don't let anyone else kiss you again."

She sounds sulky, but Neneko can't see her face so she's not sure of Mashiro's intent.
Neneko wonders how she should answer.

"But... you were the one who told me that friends kiss each other."
"...I know, but I don't like it when you kiss other people, Neko-chan."
"That goes for me as well. I don't like the idea of you kissing anyone else except me either, Mashiro-senpai."
"...In that case, how about we promise each other not to do that?"

Still a bit confused, Neneko nods. Mashiro seems relieved as she looks at Neneko with a smile.

"I'm hungry."
"It's still a bit early for dinner, isn't it?"
"I want to drink your blood, Neko-chan."

Unable to turn down a request from the person she loves, Neneko nods. Mashiro brings her face to Neneko's neck but says something unbelievable instead of sucking right away.

"It's hard to drink like this, so can I remove the buttons?"
"..."

Mashiro didn't seem to mind the previous times she sucked Neneko's blood while Neneko wore this outfit.
Neneko doesn't point that out because she's hoping for something herself.

"Um... you don't need to remove that much..."

As Mashiro undoes more and more of her buttons, the cleavage of Neneko's breasts that's barely being supported by her underwear becomes almost visible. With the white straps of her bra exposed, Mashiro now knows the color of Neneko's underwear for today.

"Are you embarrassed?"
"Because it's almost visible..."
"Are you embarrassed because you're the only one with your clothes off?"
"Eh?"
"You won't be embarrassed if both our clothes are off, right?"

Realizing what Mashiro is suggesting, Neneko's heart begins beating loudly.

When Neneko reaches out her shaky hands, Mashiro shows her a bewitching smile. That only stokes the flames.
With her heart pounding, Neneko grabs onto the hem of Mashiro's tight-knit and slowly takes it off.

Mashiro's porcelain skin is revealed first followed by her black lace bra. Neneko's eyes are glued to Mashiro's breasts which are bigger than her own.

"Now do the same and take off your clothes to the end, Neko-chan."

After undoing the remaining buttons on her shirt and removing it, both their upper bodies are left only in their underwear.

Despite being seen naked just earlier, her heart is pounding much harder now.

"Come."

Mashiro pulls her in by the shoulders and then buries her head in Neneko's neck.
While having her blood sucked, Neneko also feels the straps of her bra dropping from her shoulders.

Since Mashiro is taller than her, Neneko can't help worrying about how much of her breasts are visible to Mashiro.

"It tastes sweeter than usual."

Even after she finishes sucking blood, Mashiro continues hugging Neneko for a while.
While enjoying the sensation of Mashiro's soft skin, Neneko can't stop her heart from pounding at this tremendous sense of indecency.

There should be no need for her to strip down to her underwear just to get her blood sucked.

It's the side of her neck that her blood gets sucked from, so there's no way her bra straps could have gotten in the way. There was no reason for Mashiro to remove them.

Neneko hears pounding coming from Mashiro's chest.

Getting her hopes up that perhaps Mashiro has become a bit more aware of her, Neneko initiates a kiss with Mashiro for the first time.

After seeing Mashiro off to school, Neneko does some housework before opening her laptop to study.

Even though they have no deliveries scheduled today, the intercom rings early in the morning.

Wondering who it could be as she opens the door, Neneko sees Inui Lulu, the dogkin she met just the other day.

"Lulu-chan! What are you doing here so early in the morning?"
"Good morning, Neneko-onee-chan. Here. I've come to return the clothes I borrowed."

As she accepts the paper bag, Neneko feels strange at being called "Neneko-onee-chan".

Up until now, she had been used to being treated as the youngest child at home. She doesn't belong to any school clubs either, so she had never been called that by anyone.

Though more than all of that, no matter how she looks at it, Lulu is probably older than her so hearing Lulu say that feels out of place.

"If anything, shouldn't I be the one calling you Lulu-onee-chan?"
"Eeh~ but aren't you the older one, Neneko-onee-chan?"
"Huh?"

It's only now that Neneko notices the pink school bag that Lulu is carrying. Neneko carried a similar one almost every day back in elementary school. The school bag looks far too small against Lulu's back.

"Lu... Lulu-chan, you're an elementary schooler...!? You're younger than me...!?"

She's tall and slender. With her adult figure, Neneko thought surely she'd be around the age of a university student.

However, if she's in elementary school, then her behavior until now certainly fits her age.

She has a much more mature figure than Neneko, a high schooler, so she doesn't look the least bit like an elementary schooler.

"You should be able to tell just from looking. Here, as thanks."

The plastic bag Lulu hands her contains various cheap candies.

"Tha-thank you..."
"I'll be back again! Let's go to the candy store together next time!"

After seeing her off to elementary school, Neneko tries one of the candies she received.
She tries to remember her elementary school days as the nostalgic taste fills her mouth, but there were no elementary schoolers who looked like Lulu back in those days.

"There's no way she looks like an elementary schooler...!"

She will probably be able to enter a pub without having her age checked, and she will definitely not be taken into a police box if she wanders out alone at night.

In spite of that, she brought cheap candies to thank Neneko. She looks like an adult on the outside but is a kid on the inside. The gap is so large that Neneko almost feels dizzy.

During the weekend of that same week, Neneko and Lulu came to a nearby park.

Since Lulu had no plans and plenty of time to spare, she went over to invite Neneko out to play together.

Mashiro had things to do so she wasn't home.

While sitting down on a bench under the shade of a large tree, the two of them eat the cheap sweets they bought from a nearby candy store earlier.

"Neneko-onee-chan, what's your relationship with that person?"
"That person?"
"The girl you live with."
"Well, Mashiro-senpai is a vampire... ah, do you know about the vampire partnership system?"
"I know it. Once you form a partnership... Ah! This one's a winner! I'll go exchange it for a prize later."

The ice cream stick that Lulu happily shows Neneko has a red dot on it to mark it as a winner. Seeing her innocent delight makes Neneko realize that Lulu truly is an elementary schooler.

"So, are you dating that person?"
"No, I'm not. Although... I want her to fall in love with me since she's so wonderful..."
"Hm? But people normally wouldn't live with someone they don't like, right? Besides, there must be a romantic pulse now that you two are partners, right?"
"Lulu-chan, that's quite an impressive vocabulary for your age..."

Lulu smiles proudly at Neneko's comment and shows her a peace sign.

"I've been learning from shoujo manga!"

Despite their age difference, it feels strangely pleasant being together with her.
Perhaps it's because she's so innocent that Neneko finds comfort in her frankness.

"Though I should start looking for a lover soon too."
"Even though you're still in elementary school, Lulu-chan...?"
"Well, I mean in middle school or high school. Since dogkins have heat cycles."
"That's the same for catkins."
"But you're not dating that person, right? Neneko-onee-chan, what do you do when you go into heat?"
"Actually, I haven't experienced that yet..."

Hearing that, Lulu's eyes widen in surprise.
After all, races that have heat cycles would normally have a lover at around Neneko's age.

"Eeh? Then isn't it better to hurry up and find one? All the adults say that going into heat without a partner is extremely difficult."
"I know... but finding someone to go out with just for that reason is..."

Neneko grips the plastic bottle she bought from the vending machine with both hands.
She realizes that she's being far too much of a romantic, so she lowers her gaze to the tips of her shoes.

"I truly love Mashiro-senpai... so I don't want to rush into dating anyone because of my heat cycle... I want her to properly fall for me and then date her."

"Neneko-onee-chan..."
"I'll be fine. When I go into heat... I'll overcome it alone."

Despite her bold claim, Neneko feels terrified.
Her body will become hot regardless of her own wishes and it will even

become difficult to breathe. If she doesn't do anything about it, that will continue for seven days.

Not having experienced it herself, she's not sure she will be able to handle that alone.

"It's alright! If you're feeling anxious, Neneko-onee-chan, I'll stay by your side when you go into heat... If there's anything you want to eat, I'll bring it over to you!"
"Lulu-chan..."
"After all, I'm Neneko-onee-chan's friend! So leave it to me!"

Seeing her innocent smile soothes Neneko's heart.
Neneko and Lulu, a high schooler and an elementary schooler, would have never crossed paths if they were humans.

It's because they are catkin and dogkin that they were able to meet and become friends.
This is a strange relationship, but that's why Neneko wants to cherish it.

Despite their differences, they can understand each other's worries and be there for each other.

Chapter 6 - Miscommunication and Misunderstanding

Neneko is lying down on the soft bed while desperately covering her mouth with both hands.

On her back, she can feel Mashiro's weight and smooth skin pushing down on her.

The nape of her neck gets licked over and over.
Every time she feels hot breath on her skin, her body heats up further.

"Ngh...meow, ah."

Mashiro's tongue moves from the nape to the side of Neneko's neck before her canines pierce Neneko's skin.
At the same time, she squeezes the base of Neneko's tail. The pleasure that courses through Neneko's body overtakes the pain.

"...Ngh! Nmmgh..."

Mashiro has kept on touching Neneko in risque areas before sucking her blood so that's why her cat ears and tail are exposed.

Every time Mashiro traces Neneko's tail with her fingertips, lightly squeezes it, or rubs it, Neneko's body shivers and jumps. Intoxicated by this pleasant feeling, Neneko's eyes glaze over as she lets out a sweet voice.

"Ngh, mm... meow...."

When Mashiro puts her finger in Neneko's cat ear, the ticklish yet tantalizing feeling sends chills down her back.

Having her flushed body seen by Mashiro feels unbelievably embarrassing.

She tries to suppress her voice, but since her body is not used to such an onslaught of pleasure, her efforts prove to be futile.

"Does it feel good, Neko-chan?"

Unable to talk, Neneko does her best to nod. Then, Mashiro kisses the side of Neneko's neck opposite to where she was sucking blood from earlier. This time, Mashiro puts her lips to Neneko's skin and doesn't do anything more. Neneko can't help feeling unsatisfied.

"...It's covered in hickeys."

Even if it's just because of her meals, Mashiro has imprinted herself more and more on Neneko's body.

Lately, Mashiro has been adding new ones before the previous ones fade, so Mashiro's mark has been on Neneko at all times.

After Mashiro gets off, Neneko slowly gets back up. Still feeling somewhat hazy, Neneko thinks of something.

"...I want to leave one on you too."
"Sure."

Mashiro removes her T-shirt, leaving her in only her bra.
Contrasting the black one from before, today she's wearing a white lace bra.

Her current bra shows off her cleavage just as boldly as her previous one. With such a sensual sight before her, Neneko isn't sure where to place her eyes.

"You can go right ahead."

Neneko stops hesitating after being enticed by Mashiro and kisses her left collarbone.
After clinging to Mashiro's pristine skin, Neneko manages to leave a faint red mark but no more than that.

"Huh? Mmm, mmm..."

She noisily sucks on Mashiro's collarbone a few more times but doesn't find any success.

"You need to do it harder. Make me really feel your lips sucking on my skin."
"Mmm... Mmm... Ah! I did it!"

Neneko smiles when she sees the mark on Mashiro similar to the ones left on her own body. That mark belongs to her.
As she traces the dark mark with her fingers, Neneko realizes that her pajamas are being unbuttoned.

"Huh!? Mashiro-senpai..."

One after another, her buttons become undone until even the bottom-most one.

When the pajamas she's wearing get removed from her shoulders, Neneko's top half is left only in her bra just like Mashiro.

Although she's embarrassed to be seen in her black underwear, she has gotten used to it a bit more than before.

"It's unfair that I was the only one undressed, don't you think so?"

In this room with just the two of them, they're on the bed in only their underwear.
It's as if they're a pair of lovers.

"So you wear black underwear, Neko-chan."
"The design I liked the most only came in this color when I went to buy it, so..."
"It looks cute on you."

Mashiro, who has black hair, is wearing white underwear while Neneko, who has white hair, is wearing black underwear.

That seems to make the contrast between black and white all the more striking.

After gently pushing Neneko down on the bed, Mashiro buries her face around her collarbone.

Mashiro places a hickey on the spot matching where Neneko just put one on her and then her tongue begins moving towards Neneko's lower body.

When she kisses the part of Neneko's breasts overflowing from her bra, the shame threatens to drive Neneko crazy.

While Neneko's heart pounds, Mashiro gently rests her head on Neneko's soft chest and then looks over at Neneko.

"...Do you want to do it?"
"...Do it? What do you mean?"

Mashiro doesn't answer Neneko's question immediately.
As Neneko waits patiently for her to continue speaking, the room suddenly fills with the sound of a smartphone's ringtone.

"Ah..."
"It's coming from your smartphone. Don't answer it."

With barely any strength left in her hands, Neneko accepts the smartphone that Mashiro passes to her from the bedside.
Looking at the screen, she sees that the call is from her older sister, Neneka.

"Onee-chan? W-what's up?"
"I was thinking we should go and have a beach barbecue with the usual group of six and you for the first week of summer break. Can you go ask if Mashiro is interested as well?"

Neneko glances over at Mashiro to see that she put the T-shirt she threw off earlier back on.
She also gently put Neneko's pajamas over her shoulders.

"Um, onee-chan wants us to all have a barbecue and wants to know if you're interested..."
"Sure, let's go."

With her heart still pounding, Neneko answers her sister. She's extremely worried whether her voice sounds strange over the phone.

"Onee-chan? Mashiro said she'll go as well."
"Really? Hooray. It's going to be a day trip. We'll be able to rent out a barbecue set at the venue..."

The two exchange a few more words before ending the call.
Neneko has trouble looking Mashiro in the eye after what happened just a bit earlier.

"I'm looking forward to the barbecue."

With her back turned to Mashiro, Neneko frantically nods as she buttons up her pajamas.
Now back in their clothes, the atmosphere from before has disappeared.

Exactly what did Mashiro intend to do?
What would have happened if Neneko's sister didn't call at that time? What if Neneko listened to Mashiro and didn't answer? Would the relationship between Mashiro and Neneko have changed?

Even though it's all in the past, that's all Neneko can think about.

Neneko may have underestimated partygoers.

Seeing the glamorous group of people surrounding the grill, she couldn't help but feel the urge to leave immediately even though she had just arrived.

She managed to finally make a friend only recently, so this situation is still too far above her level.

Whenever she hangs out with Lulu, they usually go to the candy store or park. She's never been surrounded by so many strangers before.

Today is the day of the barbecue. Although Neneko heard that it would only be her and her sister's friend group of six people including Mashiro, each partygoer invited their own friends and lover along. Before anyone realized it, it became a large-scale party with well over 20 people.

She can recognize her sister's friends and lover, but those friends invited their own friends as well so Neneko doesn't recognize a single face around her.

"Haah..."

She lets out a quiet sigh that no one would notice.

They're having a barbecue on a rooftop with a view of the beach.

Since Mashiro is surrounded by other people, Neneko is eating meat all alone in the corner.
Her older sister has always had high adaptability, so right now she's busy proactively talking to people she's meeting for the first time.

Neneko knows that she has to do her best as well, but everyone here looks so dazzling that this hurdle is far too high for her to overcome.

"Um, here you go..."

With her drink now gone after having sipped all of it, a girl holding a plastic bottle of iced tea calls out to her and refills her empty cup.

"Ah, thank you very much..."
"No need to thank me..."

The girl puts the plastic bottle back on the table and idles while drinking her own tea, just like Neneko.

Taking a closer look, the girl is short and has a bob cut cropped more than Neneko's. She also has an adorable face. She seems rather timid and Neneko wouldn't expect her to be the type to hang out with all these other cheerful partygoers.

Thinking that she'll be able to hold a conversation if it's someone like this, Neneko musters the courage to say something.

"T-the weather is nice..."
"Eh!? Ah, yes, it sure is..."

Unable to think of anything beyond that, the conversation dies and an extremely awkward silence follows.
Neneko has no idea what she should be saying to someone she's meeting for the first time in a situation like this.

It's only now that Neneko truly appreciates the innocence and simplicity of her sole friend.

"Your hair is very beautiful."
"Eh?"
"I wanted to get a closer look after I saw it since it's so white and pretty... your eyes are beautiful as well."

"That's why I used pouring you a refill as an excuse to get closer," she added with a hint of mischief.
Neneko didn't expect her hair to be praised so directly like that.

Just like she thought, this girl is an extremely kind person.
Her heart relaxes and her words come out easier than before.

Being nervous might have thrown her off her usual rhythm.

"A rowdy atmosphere like this is too much for me..."
"Ah, me too! Aoi-chan brought me along and I just keep on seeing unfamiliar faces..."

She was invited Takasaki Aoi, Neneka's friend.
Since Aoi is tall, glamorous, and never hesitates no matter what, Neneko can't help but be curious about what kind of connection this girl has with her.

"Me too... I was invited by my onee-chan and came here with Mashiro-senpai, but I didn't expect this to turn into a Partygoer Festival."
"Fufu, a Partygoer Festival, huh?"

Her canines become visible as she smiles, an awfully adorable sight.
The way she modestly covers her mouth with her hand radiates a feminine charm that stirs up one's protective instincts.

"I'm also... no good with lively gatherings like this. However, I think things will be fine as long as Aoi-chan is with me, so..."

As she says that, she stares at Aoi who's on the opposite side of the grill.

"It sure is mysterious. Even though this would be impossible for me to do alone, I ended up wanting to try my best because she's with me."

Aoi, who had been surrounded by people just earlier, raises her hand and calls out, "Nono", to the girl next to Neneko.
Hearing her name called, she happily smiles and waves back. Seeing that from the side, Neneko has a feeling that the girl's expression looks similar to the one she has towards Mashiro.

"Well, time for me to get going."

After giving a slight bow, the girl called Nono walks towards Aoi.

While drinking the iced tea that the girl poured for her, Neneko is somewhat able to understand her feelings.

She might be scared alone, but if Mashiro is by her side, then she wants to do her best.

As long as Mashiro is there, she wants to step forward even if she's afraid.

"...It sure is amazing."

The power of someone you truly love is magnificent. The Neneko of the past might have come up with an excuse to leave this gathering immediately.

Summoning up her courage, she places the paper cup on the table and walks up behind Mashiro, who is still surrounded by people.

Then, she grabs onto the hem of Mashiro's clothes.

"Ma-Mashiro-senpai..."
"What's wrong, Neko-chan?"
"Um... well..."

Although it's good that she was brave enough to approach her, Neneko didn't prepare a reason to lure Mashiro away.
As she desperately tries to come up with something, she points to what appears at the edge of her vision.

"W-want to go look at the ocean with me?"
"Sure, let's go."

Mashiro shows Neneko her gentle smile and then holds Neneko's hand without thinking twice.

Looking at her hand being held, Neneko feels glad that she found the courage to approach her.

This surely would have been impossible for the Neneko of the past. Even if she wanted to call out to the popular Mashiro, all she would have been able

to do was stare at her from behind.

After falling in love with Mashiro, Neneko has become a little stronger. Thanks to the person she loves, she's able to look forward.

Even with her flip-flops covered in sand, Neneko's joy outweighs her discomfort.

The person she loves is next to her and she feels that person's warmth around her right hand.
That alone is enough to delight Neneko no matter what situation she's in.

They chose to avoid the crowded areas so there's no one else around. However, since this isn't a private beach, there's no telling when someone might come. Even so, Neneko's heart throbs loudly since they're alone right now.

The two sit side by side along the shore, gazing at the ocean.

"The barbecue was delicious."
"It sure was, although..."

It's almost 5:00 p.m. Neneko can guess what she's trying to say.
As a vampire, no matter what Mashiro eats, she'll feel hungry until she drinks blood.

"...Is it okay if I drink your blood right now?"
"Are you sure you want to even though we're outside?"

Even if anyone sees them, Neneko doesn't mind it at all as long as Mashiro is by her side.
In the unlikely event that someone tries to give Mashiro trouble for her

bloodsucking, Neneko will protect Mashiro at all costs. No matter what uncool methods she has to resort to, she will protect Mashiro.

"...I definitely wouldn't have dared to back in the past."
"Eh?"
"Sucking blood in a place where someone might see... I was terrified of people seeing me... and treating me like a monster."

After saying that, Mashiro buries her face in Neneko's neck as Neneko's body squirms.
As she feels the sweet pain followed by her blood being sucked, she timidly says something she's worried about.

"Um... my cat ears and tail pop out whenever I get into a weird mood, so... could you refrain from doing anything lewd while..."

In the end, her voice fades due to embarrassment. Mashiro moves her mouth away and chuckles while showing Neneko a mischievous smile.

"I understand."

Just as she declared, she resumes sucking Neneko's blood without licking her in any other places.
Even though this is all that's actually needed for the act of bloodsucking, Neneko can't help feeling unsatisfied.

Her body has gotten used to Mashiro's touch, so she's filled with indecent thoughts.

"After all, I wouldn't want anyone else seeing that cute side of you, Neko-chan."
"My na..."

Neneko panics when her thoughts almost leave her mouth. She didn't expect being called cute to affect her heart so much.

Her heart pounds away as her body gradually heats up.

At the same time, being called by the nickname "Neko-chan" bothers her.
In the past, she was happy just hearing Mashiro call her by that nickname, but Neneko has gradually become more selfish.

"My name is Neneko..."
"I know."
"No, what I mean is... I want you to... call me by my name."
"Do you not like being called Neko-chan?"
"It's not that... I just... never mind, it's nothing. You don't have to worry, just pretend I didn't..."

Before she finishes speaking, Mashiro kisses her on the lips.
Despite all the kisses they've shared with their tongues entwined recently, right now, this simple kiss feels unbelievably embarrassing.

"Neneko."

Neneko is sure that she must be red up to her ears and her face must have lost all composure.
It's a miracle that her cat ears and tail have not popped out.

The way they're holding hands changes from simply resting their palms against each other to a more intimate one where their fingers intertwine.

"While we're at it, you should just call me Mashiro."
"Not using honorifics is a little..."
"How about using -chan instead then?"
"Is Mashiro-san okay...?"
"I like the sound of that. That will do."

Neneko tries calling out "Mashiro-san" once again in her heart and it feels just right.
Whenever she addressed her as senpai, it was like there was a gap between them. That always made Nenenko feel a bit sad.

It's almost like she was just granted a special right, so Neneko secretly rejoices.

"Um..."

Even now, Neneko still isn't sure how to gauge the distance between them and how far she's allowed to step in.
Fumbling her way through the situation will always be scary, but if she doesn't do anything, things will just stay like this forever.

Since Neneko loves her, she wants to step forward in any tiny way possible.
As her heart races due to her nerves, she asks what has been on her mind for a long time.

"Mashiro-san, is there anyone that you like?"

Did she not expect that question? Mashiro's eyes widen just a little bit.
Although it couldn't have been more than a few seconds, time felt ten times as long to Neneko before Mashiro finally opened her mouth.

"...There is."

Neneko's heart makes a dreadful sound.
Her heart tightens more from nervousness than excitement.

(She has someone she likes...)

After all, she's such a wonderful person. Doesn't Neneko know that better than anyone?

Just who could it be?
Judging by Mashiro's recent behavior, Neneko gets her hopes up that perhaps it could be her.

"What about you, Neneko?"
"I have someone I like as well."

She somehow manages to answer despite her throat feeling dry from nervousness.

She can't see Mashiro's face. If she says that the one she likes is Mashiro, how would she react?

Neneko wants her to hug her and tell her that she feels the same, but she won't be able to recover if by any chance Mashiro says "I'm sorry for giving you the wrong idea."

If that happens, they won't be able to live together anymore.
In order to not cause any more misunderstandings after learning about Neneko's feelings, Mashiro will surely distance herself from Neneko.

For a while, they hear only the sound of waves as the two of them remain silent.

"...Let's stop talking about this."
"Eh...?"
"I got a message from Aoi that says it's almost time to leave. Let's go."

Mashiro seems to squeeze Neneko's hand with a bit more force than before. As Neneko gets pulled along behind her, she stares intently at Mashiro's beautiful black hair.

She wants to touch that hair more casually. She wants to be able to hold Mashiro's hand without needing any reason.

Despite barely being able to suppress her own ever-expanding desires, Neneko might still be too weak to take the final step even if it seems like her feelings might be able to reach Mashiro.

A few days have passed since then.

Mashiro has someone she likes. Neneko wants to believe that person is her, but in the end, she can't be sure.

If she makes her move, there's still a chance for her to get rejected.

Whenever she imagines the worst possible outcome, she freezes and isn't able to do anything in the end.

Despite believing that she has become stronger, Neneko is still weak. She can't move forward because she's terrified of getting hurt.

In the past, she would have made sure to choose a time with fewer people before coming here, but Neneko has come to this park despite it being filled with families.

Just like always, there are people staring at her. However, she's able to face forward by remembering that Mashiro called her cute.

When she approaches the bushes, she finds the calico cat she came here to see.
While keeping her voice down, she tells her about the recent updates.

"I see, so the stray dog in District 6 was a dogkin..."
"That's right. Furthermore, she looks so mature... even though she looks way more like an adult than me, she's just in elementary school."
"Kids these days are so slender."

Crouching down next to the calico cat enjoying a can of cat food, Neneko puts one of the candies Lulu gave her as thanks into her mouth.
She and Lulu bought some more candy after that, but since Lulu gave her so much initially, there's still some leftover at home.

"So, has there been any progress with Mashiro-sama?"
"...I'm too scared to make a move. I'm so uncool."

When Neneko hangs her head in shame, she feels the calico cat's soft paw on the back of her hand.

As if trying to encourage her, the calico cat gently pats it over and over again.

"...There's a saying that married couples share many things in common."
"What does it mean?"
"It seems to mean that married couples tend to have similar likes, dispositions, and personalities. I heard about it from Neneka-sama. ...It may be that we are attracted to people who are more like us than we think. It might be because we can sympathize with them that we want to get closer to them."

Neneko tilts her head. What she's saying seems profound, but she's not quite sure what the calico cat is trying to tell her.
She understands the words, but she's not sure why the calico cat would share a saying like that in this situation.

"Neneko-sama...?"

The usually composed calico cat suddenly begins sounding anxious.
She looks at Nenenko with eyes filled with worry.

"Your cheeks look red..."
"Do they?"
"Could it be a fever...? I think it's best for you to go home for the day..."

Despite Neneko telling her that she feels fine, the calico cat firmly insisted that she go home. It's rare for the mild-mannered calico cat to look so flustered.

"Even though I feel completely fine..."

Her throat doesn't ache and her nose isn't stuffy.
She doesn't have a headache or any other symptoms, so it's definitely not a cold.

However, on the way back to Mashiro's apartment...

"Huh...?"

With every step she takes, her body feels heavier.
Her breathing quickly becomes more ragged and her body temperature slightly rises.

"A fever...? But..."

Despite her body heating up, it's not too serious.
She makes it back to Mashiro's apartment, still confused by these symptoms.

Even after changing into her loungewear and lying on the bed, her ragged breathing shows no signs of improving.

Why does Mashiro have to be out with her friends for summer break on a day like this?
Unfamiliar with this sensation, Neneko helplessly rubs her legs together.

"...!"

It feels sticky. Shocked that her privates are damp, Neneko pulls down her shorts and her panties.

Her crotch is wet just as she expected. Her transparent body fluids have left a noticeable stain on her pink panties.

When she tries to gently touch her privates, a slimy liquid drips out.

"Huh...? Why...?"

She didn't carelessly wet herself. This dampness is the same as when she's aroused.

Despite the lack of stimulation, her body is changing all the same.

Confused and close to tears, Neneko's cat ears and tail suddenly pop out.

"Why... W-what is happening...?"

The base of her tail starts to tingle. Before long, the rest of her body heats up and aches as well.

Every part of her body feels itchy and sensitive.

Overcome with the urge to be touched, she finally arrives at a certain possibility.

"...Am I going into heat?"

Tears slowly well up in her eyes from this feeling of hopelessness.
It's like she has no control over her own body as it aches. She craves to be touched.

Even though she knows she shouldn't... she's desperate for further stimulation in the places that ache.
Her body seeks pleasure. If she doesn't do anything, she'll remain like this for seven days.

"...There's no way..."

She has no confidence she can withstand these changes which are far more than she had ever imagined.
It's tough having her clothes rub against her. Before she knew it, she had thrown off all her clothes.

As she lies down on the bed completely nude, she clings to her own tail and frantically plays with it.

"Meeeow! ...Meow..."

Feeling the sensation she longed for course through her body, she lets out a shameful scream. With her breathing still heavy, she pants like a female cat as she's swallowed by pleasure.

In her hazy consciousness, her hands move almost automatically in search of more pleasure.

Just as her hands extend to her lower body, she hears the sound of the front door opening.

"Neneko, I'm home."
"...! Ngh."

Hearing her lovely voice, an even stronger pleasure runs through her body.

Without knowing a thing, Mashiro opens the bedroom door to find the dazed and completely naked Neneko lying on the bed. Her eyes widen in shock.

"Neneko...?"

Even though she knows in the back of her head that she mustn't do this, Neneko has lost almost all her rationality from the intense pleasure. She's acting according to her instincts.

Normally, she'd be embarrassed just from being seen naked, but she has no time to worry about that now. With her face flushed, she stands in front of Mashiro and forcefully takes her lips.

While clumsily entangling Mashiro's tongue with hers, she desperately pushes her body against Mashiro's.

"Mashiro...san..."
"Neneko, what's wrong...?"
"Body... hot... painful... I want to feel good so much..."

Neneko seeks help as she cries in frustration. In order to calm her down, Mashiro sits her on the bed.
Mashiro stands motionless as she looks down at Neneko, extremely confused.

"...Please... touch me... You can do anything you want, don't hold back..."

Just having Mashiro in front of her makes her body wild with excitement. Being in this state further robs Neneko of her rationality. She weakly grabs Mashiro's hand and presses it against her own chest.

Just the touch of Mashiro's palm against her bare skin fills her with pleasure.

"I want you to touch me... Mashiro-san..."

After letting out a gasp, Mashiro pushes Neneko down on the bed.

Now in a similar state of arousal, Mashiro climbs on top of Neneko and strips off her clothes.

Seeing Mashiro in her underwear, Neneko can no longer contain her desires.

Her memories from that moment onward are incredibly vague.
What she does remember is that it was the best she has ever felt in her life.

Having lost all sense of reason from her first heat, Neneko unreservedly let out her sweet voice at the pleasure she received from Mashiro.

She was sure that the evening light shone through the window as their bodies intertwined.

"...you... Neneko."
"More... do it more...! Mashiro-san... ngh, ngh..."

Delirious from her restless state, Neneko could not listen to what Mashiro said at that time.

She couldn't even notice the hurt expression on Mashiro's face after she said something so important.

Even though she completely lost her presence of mind from being in heat, is there any meaning in bringing that up as an excuse?

In the midst of the kisses and their bodies intertwining, she was so focused on following her instincts that Neneko ended up forgetting what was most important.

After slowly waking from her deep sleep, Neneko notices the dimness of the room.
Wondering how long she has been awake, she tries to get up but feels an awful pain in her lower back.

It must have been because her body was in the unfamiliar position of being intertwined with Mashiro's for so long. The pain resurrects the memories of what happened in bed earlier, dying Neneko's whole body red.

She was touched many times in places she had never touched herself and they rubbed their most sensitive parts against one another.

While in heat, she had sex for the first time with the person she loves. After losing to desire, she tempted Mashiro while fully nude.

She looks at the smartphone to see that it's 2:00 a.m.
Her desires rushed out like an avalanche and they must have been doing it since evening, but she's unsure just how long Mashiro made love to her.

Her shoulders jump when she suddenly feels her hair being gently combed.
When she slowly looks over, she sees Mashiro staring intently at her.

"Mashiro-san..."
"Are you awake?"

Mashiro slowly gets up, but since she's not even wearing her underwear, Neneko isn't sure where to look. Similarly, Neneko is also not wearing anything.

Her first time was so sensational that she lost consciousness as soon as it was over.

The heat of Mashiro's body pressed against hers from earlier has already disappeared.
The estrus cycle which usually lasts for seven days ends once the body has been satisfied. After connecting her body with the person she loves, Neneko is able to satisfy all her desires.

"I-I'm sorry... that you had to be my partner when I went into heat..."

She's sure that she must have said some outrageous things while they were in the act.
Since she was so drunk on the pleasure, she must uttered some vulgar lines she normally would have never even thought of.

Since it was her first time doing something like that, it felt unbelievably good.
In her dazed and dreamlike state of mind, her heart trembled with joy from all the affection the person she loves showed her.

She couldn't help being in ecstasy after having sex with her beloved Mashiro.

"Um..."

Why did Mashiro decide to be Neneko's partner while she was in heat?
Is it okay for Neneko to think that Mashiro must have some interest in her if she decided to accompany her during that time?

Just as she summons up the courage to ask that...

"I'll be your partner whenever you go into heat from now on, Neko-chan."

Her joy at hearing that is short-lived. Neneko feels uneasy from the fact that Mashiro reverted back to calling her "Neko-chan".

"Eh...?"
"You have someone you like, right, Neko-chan? I... have someone I like as well."
"..."
"But, the person I like seems to be in love with someone else. If your feelings go nowhere as well, then..."

Neneko's ecstatic heart is suddenly brought back to reality.
As if cold water was poured over her head, her heart goes frigid.

"Well, you won't have to worry about that. Until your one-sided feelings for that person become mutual... I'll be your partner whenever you go into heat, Neko-chan."
"Why...?"
"...It felt good, so I don't mind doing it again... I don't like you that much, Neko-chan... so I won't get the wrong idea. You can rest assured."

As if the happiness from her first time was a lie, a terrible sense of despair strikes her.
Despite just having sex with the person she loves, Neneko's heart is completely frozen and aching in pain.

Mashiro didn't think anything of Neneko.
The person she loves isn't Neneko, but someone else.

"So that's how it is..."

In that case, she wishes that Mashiro didn't act in such a suggestive manner.
Due to her lack of experience, Neneko got excited by Mashiro's kind words and actions.
She began hoping that Mashiro might have liked her back in the same way.

She interpreted Mashiro's behavior to her liking and ended up getting carried away. If she thinks about it calmly, this is the most obvious conclusion.

Mashiro is kind, beautiful, and has a strong sense of justice. With her charms, anyone would admire her.

There's no way Neneko would be able to monopolize someone like Mashiro.

What should she do in this situation? If they have sex even when their feelings don't align, they'd be nothing more than sex friends.

Even though Neneko knows that such a relationship is no good...

Chapter 7 - Recollection and Regret

"...I'll be counting on you from now on."

Has Neneko always been this underhanded?

Lacking the courage to confess her own feelings, she still desires Mashiro's body despite not being able to obtain her heart.

She knows that every time they do it will chip away at her.
She knows that she will be torn apart by jealousy at the frustration of not being able to win over Mashiro's heart.

Even though Neneko is aware of all of this, she turns a blind eye. She understands no happiness awaits her on this path, but she gives in to her desires and makes the foolish choice.
It depends on the individual, but catkins typically go into heat from summer to spring. Some catkins may experience it more than four times a year while others may experience it only twice or so.

There's only about one month of summer left, so Neneko isn't sure how many more times she will go into heat this year. After all, she has only just experienced her first heat so there's still much she doesn't know.

In such a tenuous situation, she forms an insincere relationship with the one she loves. Neneko's heart trembles and she's on the verge of breaking down into tears. She barely manages to hold it in thanks to Mashiro being by her side, even if it's only physically.

As Neneko sweeps the scattered leaves with the broom, sweat gradually runs down her forehead.

With the weather still hot in mid-August, they're outside when the sun shines the brightest.

She places the chrysanthemums she had just bought this morning in a vase. She offers the cookies from a well-known shop that her mother loved.

"Alright, time to light it."

Her father lights a candle with a match and then uses it to light the incense sticks before putting it in the holder.
Her family has come to visit her mother's grave during Obon.

Her mother died in a traffic accident back when Neneko was in elementary school. At that time, Neneko was little and became extremely distraught. She was deeply saddened and couldn't eat for a while.

If it weren't for the efforts of her father and her sister Neneka, who both shared her sadness, she may have just continued brooding like that forever.

"...Mom, Neneko has also found a lover."

After putting her hands together, Neneko feels a pang of guilt after hearing her sister's report.
Although Neneka is happily sharing this piece of news, the truth is that Neneko and Mashiro are just pretending to be lovers and have lately become sex friends. Knowing that her mother wouldn't be happy knowing the truth of their relationship, Neneko feels a pain in her chest as Neneka gives this report.

"I'm sure mom would have been the most relieved to hear that. She was always worried about you, Neneko..."
"Is that so...?"

"Have you forgotten? A white cat with dual-colored eyes would have had trouble even surviving out in the wild, but people kept on saying things about your appearance... You were always crying and mom always had to comfort you."

Their mother, who is also a white cat, had white hair just like Neneko.
The two of them always stood out when they were together, but Neneko was happy that she matched her mother.

Whenever someone said anything mean to her at kindergarten, she'd feel better just from her mother stroking her hair. Those feelings from the past fill Neneko's heart.

Since they were both white cats, her mother could understand her worries.

"Well done, Neneko."

Even as her sister pats her head, Neneko has to force herself to smile.

"...I'm so glad you took a step forward even though you used to be so timid."

In reality, she hasn't taken any steps forward at all.
She always finds herself at a standstill and has just kept running away.

When she thinks about how much her loved ones worry about her, she knows that she can't allow her half-hearted relationship with Mashiro to continue like this. Her heart aches once again from the guilt of continuing this fruitless relationship with Mashiro while hiding secrets from those she cares about.

Even though they have already seen each other's most embarrassing parts when they had sex, ever since then, just exchanging glances has become awkward.

It might be because Neneko has kept the most important thing hidden in her heart all this time.

"Neko-chan."

After getting out of the bath, Mashiro addresses her by that nickname again.

The time that she called her "Neneko" had been so fleeting that it makes Neneko wonder if she might have just been hearing things.

She hasn't gone into heat since then so they haven't had sex again. It feels like their hearts are further apart now than before they entwined their bodies.

Her guilt about their current relationship is why she's unable to look Mashiro in the eyes.

"What is it?"
"I'm hungry."

After saying that, Mashiro lightly tugs on the collar of Neneko's T-shirt to expose her neck before even giving Neneko a chance to reply. Mashiro then buries her face in it and begins sucking.

"Mmm..."

The feeling of hot breath against her skin tickles Neneko and causes her body to squirm. Before long, Mashiro moves her mouth away.

Mashiro traces the new bloodsucking mark numerous times with her finger.

"Are you feeling okay? Does it seem like you'll go into heat again?"
"I'm feeling fine... Maybe I'll go into heat only once this year."

If that's the case, she and Mashiro won't touch each other.
Until she goes into heat next year, she'll need to go for about a year without feeling Mashiro's skin against her own.

The person Mashiro has feelings for is not Neneko, but someone else.
Neneko is in love with Mashiro, but Mashiro mistakenly believes otherwise.

"...I see. Has there been any progress with the person you like?"
"...Instead of progress, I'd say things have regressed and we've grown more distant."
"Well, then that person is a fool with no taste."

How cruel.

(Even though that fool with no taste is yourself...)

Although there's no way Neneko could say that out loud, she feels the urge to say something mean to Mashiro, who's talking about the situation as if it doesn't concern her.

"If I go into heat again... will you make love to me?"
"Of course... I'll accompany you until you feel satisfied."

As Neneko bites down on her lower lip, a horrible idea surfaces in her mind.

Instead of waiting for another year, she could just lie and they would be able to touch each other right now. That wicked thought begins to take root.

Neneko wants to lie to feel Mashiro's skin on hers. If she can't get her hands on Mashiro's heart, then even if it's just her body...

"...I'm looking forward to it."
"Did you feel good as well, Neko-chan?"
"Yes..."
"To feel good with someone you don't even like... Being in heat sure is something."
"...It certainly is"

Mashiro's words stab her like a cold knife through the heart.

It felt good because Neneko loves Mashiro.
She wouldn't have abandoned herself to pleasure like that with anyone else.

Even though Neneko knows that she shouldn't let this half-hearted relationship continue...

The feeling of Mashiro's soft bare skin...
Her face during the act...
Her voice which sometimes leaks out...

Now that Neneko has learned those things, she doesn't want to give that up to anyone else.

Mashiro has been acting the same as usual to the point where Neneko almost begins to wonder if that incident was just a dream.

Even though Neneko has to respond in kind, she's still childish and doesn't know how to behave around Mashiro.

One day in the final stages of summer vacation, Mashiro calls out to Neneko in the same way as before.

"Want to go out somewhere together right now?"
"Eh...?"

The two of them haven't gone out together since the barbecue.
Neneko has been wanting to invite Mashiro out somewhere, but she never figured out how to bring up the subject after that incident.

Neneko hopes that perhaps Mashiro has been thinking the same thing.

"When summer vacation ends, Neneka and the others will have a barrage of questions for us. It would be strange for us to not have gone out anywhere together even though we're supposed to be lovers."

Neneko immediately regrets foolishly getting her hopes up.

Mashiro just wants to prepare a subject for discussion, nothing more, nothing less. There are no special feelings put into it.

However, since it means Neneko can go on a date with the person she loves, she ignores the pain in her heart as she nods.

"Of course... where should we go?"
"How about a sunflower field? Now's the ideal time to see them."

After making plans to leave an hour later, Neneko hastily begins preparing. She uses the slightly high-end makeup that her sister gave her as a birthday present last year. She wants to look cuter for Mashiro, even if it's just a little, as she carefully applies the makeup.

She finishes up by changing into a white dress and applying her favorite coral-pink lipstick.

"Want me to do your hair?"
"You sure you don't mind?"
"Of course, have a seat over here."

Neneko sits on the carpet as Mashiro gently touches her hair.
Mashiro curled her hair like this before.

Back then, just the touch of Mashiro's fingers against her neck and head filled her with unbelievable happiness.

She didn't know anything at that time. Neither the pleasure of lovemaking nor the despair of the person she loves having feelings for someone else.

"...All done. That looks cute."

Neneko checks in the tabletop mirror to see that Mashiro curled her hair in the same cute style as before.

Mashiro made her white hair cute. She tries to convince herself that should be enough for her, but her greedy heart demands more and more.

Taking both the train and bus, it takes about an hour and a half before they finally arrive at the sunflower field.
Seeing the countless yellow sunflowers in full bloom, it's almost like they entered a different world. Neneko savors the joy of coming to such a beautiful place with the person she loves.

"Amazing..."

She's captivated by all the beautiful sunflowers blossoming in their full glory around them.
She frolics in the field with a wide smile on her face as she looks around.

"Look over here, Mashiro-san! It's so pretty..."

When she turns around, her eyes meet Mashiro's.
Realizing that Mashiro has been staring at her skip about like a child the whole time, embarrassment dyes her cheeks red.

"I'm sorry for acting so childish..."
"...I'm glad we came here."

With a soft smile, Mashiro pats Neneko on the head before walking ahead.

As Neneko follows behind her, her simple-mindedness almost leads her to the wrong conclusion again.
She began wondering if Mashiro was also thinking the same thing as her and feeling glad that they could be here together.

"These yellow sunflowers and your white dress make a perfect combination, Neko-chan."
"Is that so...?"
"The sunflowers match your right eye. It's a pretty color."
"..."
"The colors of your eyes and hair... truly are beautiful."

Mashiro couldn't possibly know how much courage her words have given Neneko.

Neneko has always lived her life while looking downwards. Hating what people said about her, she became a recluse and even developed a complex about the hair she had been so proud of and her eyes.

A couple walking in the opposite direction passes by them. They look surprised after seeing Neneko and begin whispering to each other.

"Did you see that girl just now?"
"Her left and right eye are different colors."
"Maybe she has some kind of disease."

If it had been in the past, Neneko would have been distressed by their words.
Every time someone said such things, she would run away and desperately

hide her feelings to avoid getting hurt. However, right now she can continue looking forward without wavering.

"Hey, you two..."
"It's fine."

Neneko grabs Mashiro's hand as she goes to confront the couple.
When she turns around, her face looks angrier than Neneko's.

"But..."
"...People have said a lot of things about my appearance and that had always bothered me, but... despite all of that, I can like myself now. That's why it's fine."

Neneko lifts her head to look straight at Mashiro.

It's because the person she loves told her she was pretty and praised her as cute.

Thanks to Mashiro, Neneko was able to accept herself.
That's how she came to like herself.

In the end, they left the sunflower field without Mashiro ever trying to hold Neneko's hand even once.
Even though she used to intertwine their fingers and squeeze Neneko's hand in the past.

"...Should we eat something before heading home?"
"Yes, let's do that..."

Even with the sun still out, Mashiro's hand looks as white and pretty as lilies in the evening.
Somewhat without thinking, Neneko takes that hand, surprising Mashiro.

They already know the taste of each other's lips and the feeling of each other's skin, so Neneko wishes that Mashiro wouldn't look so troubled just from them holding hands.

"What's wrong, Neko-chan?"

Why doesn't Mashiro call her Neneko anymore?

While lowering her gaze a bit, Neneko bites down on her lip as she tries not to cry. Then, the desire that rises up within her causes her to say something extremely unfair.

"My body... feels hot."
"Eh...?"
"I-I might be going into heat..."

Feeling ashamed and guilty for lying, she doesn't say anything beyond that. Mashiro wordlessly gets out her smartphone and begins checking something.

"...I can only find a love hotel around here, is that fine?"

Neneko nods and Mashiro gently wraps her arms around Neneko's shoulders out of concern.
Has she noticed that Neneko's body doesn't feel hot?

Neneko knows that there's no meaning in feeling the heat of Mashiro's body like this.
Even so, she wants to experience that warmth she has learned one more time.

Immediately after entering the room, Mashiro pushes Neneko onto the bed and inserts her tongue into Neneko's mouth.
After her tongue plunges in, an obscene sound fills the room as their tongues meet.

Neneko's white dress gets rolled up to her waist, exposing her beige underskirt.

"Nnn... ngh... ah..."

All the buttons at the front of her dress get undone, exposing her bare skin in no time at all.

With her breathing becoming ragged from excitement, Neneko also unhooks Mashiro's denim jeans.

Now that the two are in their underwear, Neneko stares feverishly at Mashiro's eyes.

Neneko lied.
She wanted to touch Mashiro and feel Mashiro's heat.
In order to make Mashiro's body belong to her for this short moment, she told a cowardly lie.

Without exchanging any words, the two slowly remove their underwear and Mashiro touches Neneko in her most sensitive spot.
Despite it feeling good, Neneko strangely feels like she's on the verge of tears.

Even though the person she loves is touching her, their hearts aren't connected at all.
Right now, they're nothing more than sex friends only after each other's bodies.

"Mashiro-san..."
"...What?"
"Ngh... aah... please call me Neneko..."

She pleads to Mashiro.
With a fiery gaze in her eyes, Mashiro slowly brings her lips closer to Neneko's ear.

"Neneko."
"...Ah."

As a tremendous feeling of love rises in her, Neneko lets out a moan in tandem with the movement of Mashiro's hands.

The lights are dazzling, but Neneko can clearly see Mashiro's expression thanks to their brightness.

Mashiro sucks on her neck before proceeding to lick Neneko in her sensitive spot.
Telling herself that her tears are due to joy, Neneko desperately clings to Mashiro as she moans.

Sitting on the bench that has become their usual spot, Neneko munches on candy together with Lulu.

Since summer vacation still isn't over, the park is overflowing with kids around Lulu's age.

The seesaw that Lulu likes to play on has been hogged by small kids since a while ago so they haven't gotten a turn on it at all.

"Neneko-onee-chan, did something happen?"
"Eh?"

Neneko had tried her best to remain normal around Lulu so as to not worry her.
She has been smiling and trying to act more cheerful than usual, but it seems like Lulu completely saw right through her.

"You're not as lively as usual. You seem more down compared to when summer vacation just started."

It's just like a child to be so direct.
Even if Neneko talks to her, there's absolutely no way Neneko can confide everything about that incident to Lulu since she's still only in elementary school.

The person she loves has feelings for someone else. Unable to obtain her heart, she has agreed to a relationship that is purely physical.

Neneko tries to keep her words as vague as possible to hide the details.

"...I'm having regrets right now."
"Regrets?"
"I went into heat... ever since then, things have been awkward between me and Mashiro."
"Neneko-onee-chan, did you do something?"
"I may have..."

Mashiro loves someone else and she believes that Neneko is the same.
Mashiro said that she would comfort Neneko with her body when she goes into heat and Neneko just accepted it.

Now that they're in this situation where they have basically become sex friends when the situation calls for it, there's no way Neneko wouldn't be suffering.
Her desire to have Mashiro's heart belong to her has only grown.

"If you did something wrong, then isn't it best to apologize?"

If anyone should be blamed for that incident, then it would be her.
Even though they didn't understand each other's feelings, Neneko aggressively approached Mashiro. Although she was in heat at the time, that's no excuse.

Despite Mashiro liking someone else, Neneko selfishly forced her into a purely physical relationship.

At that time, she completely lost her composure and became so audacious that she still has a hard time believing it even now.

"I'm not sure how I should apologize... how far back do I have to go before I can return to the same relationship with Mashiro-san that we once had?"

Their hearts felt more connected back when Mashiro kindly called her "Neko-chan".

The more their bodies intertwine, the further away Mashiro seems to move.

"Neneko-onee-chan..."

Seeing Neneko in such low spirits, Lulu's eyebrows furrow in concern.
Neneko gently pats her head, feeling regretful for putting that expression on the younger girl's face.

She wants this kind and pure girl to smile.

"However, I'm feeling better now after meeting you, Lulu-chan. Thank you."
"That's good... ah! The seesaw is available!"

They quickly get up from the bench.
As Neneko plays on the seesaw across from Lulu, her heart feels lighter for just this short while.

Even though Mashiro is just eating mapo tofu with a spoon, she still looks as beautiful as ever and Neneko ends up admiring her. Her long black hair is tied back, a rare and invigorating sight.

"Today's mapo tofu is delicious."
"Really? I tried modifying the recipe from last time."

Neneko truly misses the days when she would feel happy from their casual conversations.
She still talks to Mashiro every day even now, but Mashiro acts more reserved and it's like there's an invisible wall between them. Neneko felt much happier back when she obtained Mashiro's contact information and they just started living together.

Even though she has now felt the softness of Mashiro's skin and heard the many voices of Mashiro after she has lost her calmness, she still thinks back to the days when she still didn't know any of that. It's probably because she's not satisfied with their current situation.

Lying on the narrow single bed, the distance between the two of them is extremely close. Do they look like a pair of affectionate lovers to an observer who wouldn't know any better?

Since Mashiro has finished sucking blood, the two of them will probably just go to sleep now.

Mashiro looks cozy in her thin pajamas.
Without her red lipstick, her face looks more innocent than usual.

"...Neko-chan, about the one you like... what kind of person are they?"
"They're really wonderful."

There's no way Neneko can say that it's Mashiro.
Knowing that would only put Mashiro on the spot, Neneko desperately tries to keep that in her heart.

"...At first, I admired their looks and coolness, but turns out they're actually quite clumsy... but in the end, they're still mature and..."

Her feelings of love turn into sorrow and her voice begins to tremble.
With Mashiro so close, she surely must have noticed the change in Neneko.

Tears slowly form in Neneko's eyes and soon they begin running down her cheeks.

She loves her.

From the bottom of her heart, Neneko is helplessly in love with Mashiro and she wants Mashiro to return her feelings.

Neneko wants Mashiro to tell her that she loves her.

"Neko-chan..."
"...They're a truly wonderful person..."

A fleeting kiss that barely touches her.

"...Eh?"

Neneko stares at Mashiro's lips that were just on hers.

"If it's so painful that it makes you cry... then you should just forget about that love."

This person can truly be cruel.
Neneko can't see Mashiro's face as this sharp pain gets carved into her heart.
She didn't have to say that to her. Neneko's throat stings even more.

While biting her lips, she frantically shakes her head.

"No..."
"...."
"I don't want to forget..."

The moment Neneko begins to throw a tantrum, Mashiro suddenly gets on top of her and kisses the side of her neck.
Mashiro sucks on Neneko's neck with a bit more force than usual, hurting her.

"Ow..."

This is the first time that Mashiro has been so rough, leaving Neneko confused.
The dress Neneko uses as loungewear gets pulled up and her now-exposed bra gets unhooked in no time at all.

"Ma-Mashiro-san...?"

Neneko's shoulders jump when Mashiro buries her face in her chest.
Every time her sensitive spots get pinched, Neneko lets out a moan from the tantalizing sensation.

"Ngh...!"

Neneko is not in heat right now. Despite that, Mashiro is beginning to make love to her.
Neneko's thighs rub together in impatience as she lets out her sweet voice.

"...I'm not in heat right now."
"...I'm aware."
"Mashiro-san..."
"No more talking."

Despite it feeling so good, why is Neneko in so much pain?
Why is Mashiro touching her even though she knows that Neneko isn't in heat?

Even after being shown the cruel reality, Neneko is still foolish enough to get her hopes up.

If she loses focus even a little, she'll misinterpret Mashiro's actions for her own convenience and end up wanting to confess.

That's why she wants Mashiro to stop this. She can't let Mashiro touch her so gently like this any further. However, she's so helplessly in love with Mashiro that she just lets her do as she pleases.

In the past, Neneko would never have chosen an outdoor seat where she'd be visible to all the people passing by.

She used to hate other people stealing glances at her so much, but now she can keep her head held high.

Even if anyone says something about her, she can dismiss it as nothing more than noise.

Today, she has come to the cafe in front of the train station with her sister for the first time in a while.
This is the cafe where her sister's friend, Aoi, works part-time. Both she and her sister have taken a liking to the calm ambiance here.

"How have things been with Mashiro lately?"
"We've been getting along."
"I see... ah, has your heat cycle started yet?"

Neneka lowers her voice when asking that and Neneko responds with a nod.
Neneka's relief shows on her face.
The start of her heat cycle proves that Neneko has been growing healthily.

"Really? That's good to hear."
"Still, that was a shock... Even though it's my own body, I couldn't control it at all..."
"It might be surprising at first, but you'll get used to it before long."

Neneko takes a sip of her lemon tea through a straw and the invigorating taste spreads inside her mouth.
In the past, she drank only iced coffee, but after being influenced by Mashiro, she picks this whenever it's available on the menu.

"Did you experience any issues?"
"Well, it was my first time doing something like..."
"That's not what I mean... Some people have hazy memories after going into heat."
"Eh...?"

Neneko's movements stop after hearing that for the first time.
Seeing Neneko's confusion, her sister continues to explain.

"Well, you're not thinking clearly... and you become delirious from the heat, so sometimes there are gaps in your memory."
"...Then, there's a chance that I might be forgetting something?"
"Not everyone is like that, but I also forgot quite a few things after going into heat for the first time..."

Her sister bashfully admits that she was so confused that she almost panicked.

Like her sister, Neneko definitely wasn't thinking clearly during that time. She suddenly went into heat and could only focus on obtaining pleasure.

Neneko felt so happy during her first time making love, but how did Mashiro feel?

She can't remember Mashiro's face from that time at all.

Her memory of her first time is hazy in a few places and she didn't pay it much mind until now, but could it be possible that she overlooked something important? Neneko realizes that for the first time.

Even though she was there during the incident, she has no idea what she could have forgotten.
No matter how much she tries to think about it, there's no way she can recover memories she never had in the first place.

As she passes by the park while sighing, her only friend calls out to her.

"Neneko-onee-chan!"

Lulu runs up to her somewhat nervously.

She's clutching the skirt that she once mentioned is her favorite to the point that it's starting to wrinkle.

"I've been waiting for you to pass by here this whole time."
"Did we make any plans to play together today...?"

Lulu slowly shakes her head.
That makes Neneko confused about why she's here, especially given her unusual behavior.

"...Hey, Neneko-onee-chan, can you keep a secret?"
"What's this all about?"
"Never mind that and just answer me!"
"Well, I have no other friends except you... so I don't have many people I can talk to in the first place."

After looking around restlessly, Lulu bends down slightly and puts her mouth close to Neneko's ear.

She speaks very quietly as if to share a secret.

"...Alright, I'll let you meet that person."
"Eh...?"
"Come with me."
"Where are we going...?"
"...Since I don't want to see you looking sad anymore, Neneko-onee-chan."
"What are you talking about...wait, Lulu-chan...!"

Without giving a full explanation, Lulu grabs Neneko's arm and begins running.
Since Lulu is taller, Neneko can barely keep up with her longer strides.

To begin with, there's already a huge difference in energy between an elementary schooler like Lulu and a shut-in like Neneko.

Breathing heavily while desperately trying to keep up, Neneko finally gets a chance to catch her breath when Lulu stops in front of a building in District 5.

This old Western-style building has a somewhat unwelcoming air.
It's surrounded by beautiful English garden-like greenery, but the thorns of the blooming roses seem to be there to ward off anyone from entering.

"What is this place...?"
"Don't tell anyone, okay?"
"Does someone live here?"
"Witch-san."
"What!? A witch...!?"
"Keep your voice down."

Guessing that this is a secret unknown to the public, Neneko suppresses her voice and apologizes.
This is a world containing vampires, catkins, and dogkins, so it wouldn't be strange for witches to also exist in it.

"I've also met her only twice when my mom brought me along, but Witch-san lives here. You'll know what I mean once you meet her."

When Lulu presses the intercom, a female voice answers. Judging by her tone, she seems quite young.

Since Lulu said she was a witch, Neneko imagined someone older.

"Yes?"
"It's Lulu."
"Did something happen?"
"I came to ask you for a favor."

After the voice invites them in, the gates slowly open.
This path overgrown with roses seems otherworldly.

Swallowing her saliva, Neneko hardens her resolve and enters with Lulu.

The serene girl wearing glasses sitting on the antique chair looks to be around the same age as Neneko.
Lulu happily calls out to her.

"Witch-san! How have you been?"

Despite inviting them in, the one Lulu calls a witch doesn't seem thrilled by their visit. She seems somewhat troubled as she sighs while furrowing her eyebrows.

"What did you come here for? Didn't I already tell you to never come..."
"I'm sorry... Anyways, I want you to recover this person's memories."

When Lulu says "this person", she points to Neneko.
Through her glasses, the witch's eyes meet Neneko's.

Her round eyes are very cute.

"Neneko-onee-chan is a catkin, so..."
"Is that so...? You could have mentioned that sooner."

After hearing that, the witch's wariness drops.

Witches are probably similar to catkins when it comes to how they secretly live in society while hiding their true identities.

"I've heard stories about catkins... so they really exist."
"I'm sorry for imposing all of a sudden..."
"You don't need to worry."
"So, Witch-san, are you really a witch...?"

When Neneko takes a sip out of the cup presented to her, the distinctive flavor of rosehip tea spreads in her mouth.
There are only roses in the garden, so that's most likely this person's favorite flower.

With all the antique furniture in here coupled with the dim lights, it feels like Neneko entered a different dimension.

"Lulu-chan just started calling me that on her own. Those from our family have the ability to look into other people's memories using a crystal ball."
"Is that sort of thing really possible...?"
"Why are you so surprised by that when you can turn into a cat? Lulu-chan just found it amusing to call me a witch since I can perform such a tasteless act..."
"I see..."

The girl called a witch laughs awkwardly. Due to Lulu's childlike innocence, she probably didn't feel like correcting her.
She probably finds it boorish to rain on Lulu's parade.

"You see, Neneko-onee-chan made the person she loves angry, but she doesn't know why! She's been worrying about it all this time and I felt sorry for her, so I want you to help her!"
"Eh? The only thing I can show is the truth of the past. Showing the other party's feelings are beyond my abilities..."
"Even so, I don't mind..."

Neneko grips her skirt tightly.
She can't help worrying that something happened while she was in heat.

If she forgot something important, then she wants to know what it is.

"I understand. So whose memories should I peek into? Should I proceed with yours, Neneko-sama?"
"You can show Mashiro-sa... the other party's memories?"
"If you bring that person here... or have a photo, then that will be possible."

While saying that, she carefully takes out a crystal ball from the shelf. She truly looks like the very image of a magician. Although she denies it herself, Neneko understands why Lulu is so eager to call her a witch.

"Lulu-chan, please go to the room next door."
"Eh, why?"
"I'll give you some sweets later if you do."

The witch might be more used to dealing with Lulu than Neneko.
Hearing the word sweets, Lulu smiles and happily says, "Okay!" before leaving the room.

Now that the two of them are alone, the witch holds her hands over the crystal ball.

"So... whose memories will it be?"
"...Please use mine."

Neneko cannot look at Mashiro's memories without permission.
Since they both shared that time together, there's no issue with using Neneko's memories.

"How far back should we go?"
"Um..."

Neneko checks her calendar on her smartphone and tells the witch the date when she went into heat.

"What time?"
"Around evening..."
"All right. I'll begin projecting your memories.."

As she focuses, the transparent crystal ball slowly turns cloudy.
Gradually, colors begin to emerge. Before long, the events of that day get reflected in the crystal ball.

"Nnn... Nnngh...! Mashiro-san..."

Neneko's voice echoes in the room and the witch's hands leave the crystal ball due to shock.
Hearing her own voice, Neneko's cheeks immediately redden from embarrassment.

She was so desperate to recover her lost memories that she completely forgot it also meant she'd have to look back at when the two of them first made love.

To have someone she's meeting for the first time see her lewdly intertwining on the bed is absurdly embarrassing.

"Wha-wha... what the heck is this!?"
"I-I'm sorry...!"

The witch's cheeks are just as red as Neneko's.
It's only natural to be flustered after being shown two women intertwining in bed with no warning.

"...Do you really want to continue watching?"
"Yes... I'm really sorry... Please show me more."

The witch holds her hands over the crystal ball once again and the scene from before resumes.

Feeling sorry for the witch who has shut her eyes out of embarrassment, Neneko's own eyes are narrow as she nervously looks at the events of that day.

"Ah..."

At that time, Mashiro looked extremely happy as she poured her affections on Neneko.
She didn't hate it. In fact, she looked at Neneko so lovingly.

"Nngh... Aaah... Meow..."
"You're so cute, Neneko."

Despite Neneko's vulgar cries, Mashiro called her cute.
As Neneko continues looking at the crystal ball, she can't believe what Mashiro says next.

"...I love you, Neneko."
"Whatever... just hurry up already..."

Neneko doesn't remember any of this.
She cannot find any trace of Mashiro confessing to her in her memories.

"No way..."

She must have been far too delirious to pay attention to what Mashiro said.
Her desire for pleasure caused her to completely ignore Mashiro.

Even though Mashiro had confessed her feelings to Neneko...
When those feelings were dismissed, her joyful expression from before immediately changed.

Her expression contorts as if she's about to cry and her voice shakes.

"Mm... I'm sorry for saying something weird..."

She must have been devastated.
Convinced that her feelings meant nothing to Neneko, her love shattered before her. That's how she must have taken it.

To have her feelings treated as if they meant nothing, how much did it hurt?

"You can stop now..."
"Huh? ...A-are you sure?"

Neneko covers her face with her hands and drops her head.
Her frustration with herself is driving her insane.

Looking back now, what Mashiro said to Neneko when she woke up in the middle of the night seems off.

"You have someone you like, right, Neko-chan? I... have someone I like as well."
"..."
"But, the person I like seems to be in love with someone else. If your feelings go nowhere as well, then..."

At that time, Neneko thought Mashiro had someone else she liked, but the way she said it was strange.

She wanted to make sure Neneko knew that there was someone else she liked.
She must have thought that would prevent things from getting awkward between them.

At the edge of Neneko's vision, Mashiro's expression was clearly distorted by pain.

"Well, you won't have to worry about that. Until your one-sided feelings for that person become mutual... I'll be your partner whenever you go into heat, Neko-chan."
"Why...?"
"...It felt good, so I don't mind doing it again... I don't like you that much, Neko-chan... so I won't get the wrong idea. You can rest assured."

What was Mashiro feeling back then?

How much was her heart hurting? Just trying to imagine it brings Neneko to tears... but the one who was truly hurt is Mashiro.

Even now, Mashiro is still suffering because of this misunderstanding.

"...Thank you, Witch-san. I'll come back again next time to properly show my gratitude."
"You don't need to..."
"Lulu-chan is in the room next door, right?"
"I'll make sure she gets home safely, so you go to where that person is."

Neneko bows her head deeply. Without her help, the misunderstanding between Neneko and Mashiro would have never been cleared away.

"Thank you so much!"

Neneko dashes out of the witch's house as the tears she can't hold back overflow.
Even as it becomes harder for her to breathe, she continues running in order to embrace the girl she loves.

By the time she left the witch's house, the sun had completely set. Despite being out of breath, Neneko desperately runs down the streets illuminated by the streetlights.

She finally arrives home and slams the door open, but Mashiro is nowhere to be found.

"Huh...?"

She takes off her sandals and searches the apartment, but all the lights are off.

As she slowly regulates her erratic breathing, she remembers that Mashiro said she would be out with Neneko's older sister and the others today.
Neneko was so overwhelmed by her feelings that she forgot about that.

Even though Neneko could have just waited until Mashiro returned, she ran out of the apartment due to feeling restless.

She wants to see Mashiro as soon as possible, so she thought she could at least meet her at the train station.

The strap of her sandals comes off along the way and she loses her balance, causing her to fall down pathetically. However, she stands back up immediately and resumes running.

"..."

Fortunately, it doesn't hurt too much and she isn't bleeding.
Even so, Neneko still cries because of how much her chest hurts when she thinks about Mashiro.

How much is Mashiro suffering?

Her feelings were blown off by the person she loves and they kept on misunderstanding each other.
When she thinks about how Mashiro must be feeling, she can't help feeling pain in her heart.

Neneko had forgotten.
The two of them are alike.

People kept on criticizing them, causing them to lose confidence and keep their heads down. There's no confidence to be found when they're feeling guilty about their own existence.

Neneko is not the only one who is more timid and scared than she needs to be. That's why she said they should face forward together, and yet...

"Neneko-sama."

Surprised at suddenly hearing her name called, she stops.
Looking down at her worriedly from the top of the fence is the calico cat that has helped her time and time again.

"Where are you off to in such a hurry this late at night? And you're crying, aren't you...?"
"...To Mashiro-san... I want to tell her I love her... I'm still a bit scared, but..."

She says that while catching her breath and desperately wiping away her tears. With just that, the mature calico cat seems to have perceived everything.
Perhaps the perceptive calico cat noticed something far before Neneko ever did.

"It will be all right."

The calico cat gets down from the fence and slowly approaches Neneko. She gently touches Neneko's foot with her paw to encourage her.
This gentle sensation gradually warms Neneko's heart.

"I told you, didn't I? There's a saying that married couples share many things in common..."
"...Ah."
"When you're anxious or in pain... what would you want someone to do for you? Like how Mashiro-sama taught you how to look forward... you just need to do the same for her."

The calico cat says that as she looks at Neneko. Those words grant Neneko courage.
The calico cat has always looked after her and given her timely advice, just like a mother would.
Perhaps that's why Neneko always depends on her and feels like she can talk to her about anything.

Glancing at her smartphone, she sees that it's already 9:00 p.m.
She hasn't heard from Mashiro, so she sends her a message to ensure they don't miss each other.

As she walks through the roundabout in front of the ticket gates, she sees a cat crossing the road.

Just as she's about to pass it without giving it a second thought, the stray cat enters the roundabout despite the traffic.

"Look out!"

Even after she yells, the cat doesn't turn around.
Some strays are not aware of the existence of catkins.
They would never expect humans to be talking to them.

"...!"

At the worst possible time, a taxi enters the roundabout.
Before Neneko knew it, her body moved reflexively to grab the stray cat that was about to be run over.

That's when the loud car horn echoes in her eardrums. She closes her eyes just as she's about to get hit.
Suddenly, she feels a strong grip on her arm before getting pulled back.

When she sees the taxi passing by in front of her, she realizes that she just narrowly avoided danger.

Her heart is pounding noisily, but when she turns back to thank her savior, she finds the girl she loves.

"...Mashiro-san."

They move to the sidewalk and she gently lowers the cat. The cat immediately runs off to the bushes.

When Neneko looks at Mashiro again, she notices Mashiro seems taller than usual since she's wearing heels. Her long black hair is neatly curled for going out and she looks so mature that it's hard to believe that she's a high schooler.

"...What were you thinking?"

Mashiro's voice is trembling as she cries.
Tears fall down one after another from her large eyes.

"...Don't you realize that you could have gotten run over?"

While wiping her tears away with one hand, she puts her other hand on Neneko's shoulder.
Neneko's chest tightens as she watches Mashiro sob convulsively.

"...Don't... If even you leave me, Neko-chan..."

She's crying just like a child would.
Mashiro sounds absolutely terrified as her mouth trembles.

"Neko-chan... stay with me forever..."

Influenced by her words, a tear runs down Neneko's cheek as well.

She's feeling scared and anxious. Seeing Mashiro crying like a child, Neneko pulls her into a hug before she realizes it.

Putting her arms around Mashiro's back burying her head in her shoulders, Neneko says the words she has wanted to say for a long time.

"...Mashiro-san."
"...What?"
"...I love you, Mashiro-san."
"...That's a lie, right?"

Mashiro stares at her wide-eyed in disbelief.
However, a faint hope is visible in her eyes. Even so, she can't take Neneko at her word since she's terrified of getting hurt.

"After all... you completely blew off my confession..."
"...You might not believe it, but... when I was in heat, I wasn't myself. I was so delirious that I couldn't think straight... so I couldn't respond properly."

Neneko gently rubs Mashiro's trembling back.
She softly tells her that there's no need to be scared or anxious. Mashiro looks just like Neneko did in the past when she had no self-confidence and only looked down.

"I've lost bits of my memory before and after going into heat... Today, thanks to a witch, I now know everything that happened at that time."

Even after hearing all of that, Mashiro anxiously shakes her head many times.
That's how deeply Neneko hurt her heart.

"...You don't believe me?"
"I'm too scared to..."

Mashiro drops to the sidewalk while crying and Neneko crouches down so they're at the same height.
She frantically pats Mashiro's head in the same way that Mashiro did for her.

"...Losing someone important to me... Having people say cruel things to me... Everything's too scary... Being treated as a monster as well..."
"Mashiro-san, you're not a monster."
"There's no way... that Neko-chan can love someone like me."

Neneko grabs Mashiro's cheeks a little forcefully to make her look her way. Then, even though they're in front of the train station with passersby, she kisses Mashiro.

There are people staring, but Neneko doesn't care about that.
Now that she's face-to-face with Mashiro, she can't worry about strangers looking at her.

"...Me too. I felt the same way."

She was terrified of others saying cruel things about her and always hid herself as she lived.

Believing that someone as popular as Mashiro could never fall in love with her, she gave up and learned to hold back, but she was starved for the joy of being loved more than anyone else.

"I had no confidence in myself... Due to my appearance, I didn't think there would be anyone who would like me... I've always thought that you would never fall for me, Mashiro-san."
"You're beautiful, Neko-chan... the color of your hair.... and your eyes... they're sparkling and radiant...."
"Thanks to you saying things like that, I came to like myself."

Neneko takes her hand and squeezes it tight, intertwining their fingers.
She loves feeling Mashiro's warmth through her palm.

"...I love that you're a vampire, Mashiro-san. The way you look when you're enjoying my blood, the bloodsucking marks you left on me... I find them all lovely."

Neneko gently kisses a new tear that falls from Mashiro's eye.

The tear tastes slightly salty. She doesn't want Mashiro to cry any more than this.
She likes seeing her smiling face more than her crying one.

"...If you're feeling anxious, Mashiro-san, I'll say it as many times as it takes. You're amazing and cute, Mashiro-san... You're the charming person I've one-sidedly loved for many years."
"..."
"...I couldn't have become like this alone. The eyes around me, the

inferiority complex that has been built up over many years... I definitely wouldn't have overcome it by myself. But... if it's with you, Mashiro-san, I feel like I can become anything."

The hand she's holding tightly squeezes her back.
Seeing the light return to Mashiro's eyes, Neneko feels a huge sense of relief.

"...Say it again."
"I love you, Mashiro-san... I love you so much."
"I love you too, Neko-chan."

When Neneko pouts, Mashiro notices and smiles.
Despite the traces of tears still on her cheeks, her smile looks extremely happy.

"I love you, Neneko."

For four years, Neneko longed for this moment.
The person she loves telling her that she loves her back while they smile at each other.

This time, Neneko is the one about to cry her eyes out and she desperately tries to hold back.
However, she has no success and her tears begin rolling down.

That seems to have an effect on Mashiro since she begins crying again.
Even though they're crying as they hold hands, Neneko's heart feels extremely warm.

This is her first time realizing that tears of joy can feel so warm.
She feels truly glad that she fell in love with Mashiro. She's delighted to be able to think that now.

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Neneko's body stirs as her neck gets kissed.

Every time Mashiro kisses her while on top of her on the bed, Neneko's heart trembles with joy.

The sight of Mashiro sucking her blood fills her with so much love.

It's endearing seeing her frantically suck her blood, so Neneko ends up smiling.

"Fufu..."
"What are you smiling about?"
"It's like you're a baby and I find that cute..."

Seeming indignant at those words, Mashiro sucks on Neneko's skin with more force than before.
Her hand slips in through the hem of Neneko's dress and she rubs Neneko's sides in a tantalizing manner. As Neneko twists about in pleasure at this two-pronged assault, Mashiro touches her skin as if to stir her up even further.

"Ah! Mashiro-sa...n! ...Ngh..."
"Can you not compare your lover to a baby?"

The word "lover" slowly echoes in Neneko's heart.

For many years, she longed for this relationship. At long last, she and Mashiro have become lovers.
When she was timid, she never thought Mashiro would possibly like her back and had been content with just staring at her from behind.

The Neneko from four years back would have never believed it if she had been told that a future where she and Mashiro become lovers awaits her.

"Mashiro-san and I are lovers now..."

As she savors that word once again, her clothes get lifted up to her chest.
She feels a tremendous amount of shame as her body gets exposed in this bright room.

Even though she has had sex with Mashiro multiple times, she's still feeling nervous now.

Unable to hold back, her cat ears and tail become exposed.

"Wa-wait..."
"What's wrong?"
"...I don't know why, but... I'm feeling so embarrassed that I could die..."

Even though they have gone as far as to intertwine their bodies, why is she feeling so unsure now that they've communicated their feelings?

Does her face look strange?
Are her moans too loud?

Now that they're lovers, she can't help worrying about such things.
Even if she wouldn't be able to see Mashiro's expression, she'd rather have the lights off so Mashiro wouldn't be able to see how flustered she was.

As she falters, Mashiro's hand touches her cheek.
Mashiro breaks into a smile as she gently caresses Neneko's cheek.

"...Do you understand how I felt now?"
"Eh...?"

"During our first time when you were in heat, you were so aggressive, Neneko... I was so embarrassed that I felt like I was going insane."

Mashiro pouts as she mutters even though it was her first. That sight of Mashiro puts a tight grip on Neneko's heart.
Her heart is loudly screaming to kiss Mashiro right away.

"What you grinning about?"
"I was thinking how cute you are, Mashiro-san."
"Huh? I have no idea what you're talking about, but..."

As if to play a prank on her, Mashiro tickles her sides. Neneko bursts into laughter.
Unlike before, Mashiro isn't touching her in a tantalizing way so Nenenko naturally ends up smiling.

"Haha! That tickles."
"Neneko."

Hearing her name, Neneko looks up to find Mashiro's lips right next to hers. Their lips meet for only a moment and when Neneko closes her eyes, Mashiro kisses her again.

Mashiro brings her lips just close enough for their lips to touch and Neneko slowly opens her mouth.
As soon as that happens, Mashiro's hot tongue invades as Neneko lets out her muffled voice.

"Hmm... mmm."

As Mashiro runs wild in Neneko's sensitive mouth, her hands slowly extend to Neneko's lower half.

Neneko can't help feeling embarrassed, but if Mashiro is her partner, then she'll accept the shame and seek the pleasure that lies beyond.

As long as it's with her beloved, she'll be able to withstand any amount of embarrassment.

Now that their hearts are connected, she feels far better and happier compared to the other times they made love. Even though this isn't their first time, Neneko is surprised by how sweet her own moans sound.

While at the mercy of Mashiro's passion, tears of joy slowly fall from finally being able to entwine their bodies as lovers.

Chapter 8 - Future and Resolve

Seeing her carefully inspect the cheap sweets, Neneko gets reminded once again that Lulu is in elementary school.

Due to her looking much more mature than Neneko, sometimes Neneko forgets that.

She seems to be having fun considering what candies to buy with her allowance. Last time she treated herself to something more extravagant and received a light scolding for it.

"Neneko-onee-chan, why did you leave without me last time?"
"I'm sorry. I'll buy you some candy to make up for it."
"I'll buy what I eat with my own money!"

Neneko thought this was her chance to show her gratitude, but Lulu remained steadfast as she excitedly brought her candies to the cash register.

Neneko thought it would be okay to treat her since she was a kid, but Lulu might be at the age where she wants to act more like an adult.

After shopping at the candy store, they sit on the bench park that has become their usual spot. Even though summer vacation has ended, it's still hot out.

As sweat drips down her forehead, Neneko thanks Lulu once again.
If Lulu hadn't introduced her to the witch on that day, Neneko and Mashiro might have continued their misunderstanding and drifted further apart.

"Thank you. Because you introduced me to Witch-san, I patched things up with Mashiro-san... and we started dating."

After Neneko bashfully tells her that, Lulu hugs her out of joy.

"Amazing! That's great news!"
"...I'm truly so grateful to you."
"I decided to tell you about her because you're you, Neneko-onee-chan. My mom told me to not tell anyone about Witch-san, but... because you're kind and I like you so much, I decided to tell you."

The two look at each other and smile.
An elementary schooler and high schooler normally would not have crossed paths and become friends.

From society's perspective, neither of them is normal. However, thanks to that, Neneko was able to meet Lulu.
She has made a precious friend she can be herself around.

"Having a lover sure is nice. I want one too."
"It might still be too early for you, Lulu-chan..."
"That's not true!"

Even if Neneko forgets at times due to Lulu's appearance, she's still a sixth-year elementary schooler.
When the day comes that Lulu finds a lover, Neneko might end up judging that person since she secretly considers Lulu a younger sister.

Neneko will look at that person with a stern eye to make sure they aren't someone who will make Lulu sad. She now understands Neneka and her father's feelings well.

"Let me know if you find a lover."
"Of course! Then we can all go on a double date!"

That will probably happen a few years in the not-so-distant future.
Lulu will be in high school by then. It will definitely be fun if Neneko, Mashiro, Lulu, and Lulu's lover all go out somewhere together.

Just imagining that bright future makes Neneko's heart soar as she looks forward to it.

Neneko goes together with Lulu to the person that she needs to thank the most. The rosehip tea tastes just as delicious as before and Neneko couldn't help drinking it at a quicker pace than usual.

"I really can't thank you enough for what you did last time, Witch-san."

She bows her head deeply to show her gratitude to the witch.

Just imagining the possible future that awaited her without the witch's help scares Neneko.
Now that her and Mashiro's hearts are finally connected, her heart grows cold imagining what could have happened if their misunderstanding didn't get resolved.

The witch seems a bit confused by Neneko's gratitude.

"...You don't find it creepy?"
"What do you mean?"

"Being able to peek into people's memories without permission... you don't find my ability creepy...?"

The witch's voice trembles as she says that. Lulu gently embraces her.
With her body completely wrapped by Lulu, the witch's eyes seem to shake slightly.

"What are you saying!? She's thanking you, Witch-san, so just gracefully accept it!"

Perhaps everyone is similar when it comes to that.
Other people may find them impressive, but the person in question might not see things the same way.

Whether it's their abilities or appearances, some may have a complex about it and won't be able to face forward.
That's why they look down and desperately try to hide their true selves.

Neneko lacked confidence in herself and was afraid of others, but when she found the courage to raise her head, she discovered a world brighter than she expected.

It wasn't just scary things. Once she stepped forward, an unbelievable amount of happiness awaited her.

Various races are afraid of encountering prejudice, but Neneko now believes that the world may not be as scary as they think.

There will be people who say unpleasant things, but there are also plenty of kind people out there.

Vampires, catkins, dogkins, humans, witches, and all the other groups holding their breath...
Neneko can't help hoping that the day will come when everyone will be able to smile together.

Without thinking, Neneko narrows her eyes at how comfortable the hand gently touching her head feels.

It has been one week since the two of them became lovers.
Today, they took a bath together for the first time and now Mashiro is drying her hair for her.

She's still not used to having her skin exposed in a well-lit place, but Neneko must have fallen for Mashiro hard if she's willing to endure the embarrassment in order to see Mashiro's body.

"Neneko, your hair has gotten longer."
"I'm wondering if I should just let it grow out..."
"You don't like your bob cut?"
"Since your long hair is so beautiful, Mashiro-san, it made me want to have long hair again."

Unlike Neneko's soft cat-like hair, Mashiro's pretty hair that goes down to her waist is straight.

She knows that their hair won't match even if she grows hers out, but she still admires it.

Once Mashiro turns off the hair dryer, she hugs Neneko from behind.

Neneko can smell the scent of Mashiro's favorite body cream with her so close.

"So if I cut my hair, would you keep yours as a bob?"
"Mashiro-san with a bob cut..."

If Mashiro lets her bangs flow like she usually does, then a uniform bob cut should really suit her.

Neneko imagines Mashiro with that hairstyle combined with bright red lipstick. The more mature vibe makes her heart beat faster.

"I'd like to see it, but... it also feels like a waste of to cut your glossy hair..."

Seeing Neneko racking her brain over this, Mashiro smiles in amusement. Ever since they became lovers, Mashiro has been showing her smile more and more often.

She usually has a poker face that matches her cool image. It makes Neneko feel special that Mashiro shows her changing expressions in front of her.

"I'm kidding. Make your hair however you like, Neneko."

After swapping positions, Neneko becomes entranced by Mashiro's pretty long hair as she dries it. As much as she admires it, she decides to keep her hair in a bob since it's easier to manage.

"Is the dryer too hot?"
"It's fine... though for some reason I become sleepy whenever you touch my head."

The way she yawns is childish and very cute.
Every one of Mashiro's movements fills Neneko with affection.

"How about going to bed after this?"
"Sure. Tomorrow is the weekend, after all."

Mashiro turns around and Neneko sees the drowsiness in her eyes.

"We can take it easy tonight."
"Eh..."

Neneko almost drops the dryer but manages to catch it.

After turning off the power, she feels her heart thumping in excitement. It's embarrassing, but she nods since it will make Mashiro happy. After all, even Neneko doesn't dislike things that feel good.

"...When you say we should take it easy, exactly how is it different from how we usually do it?"
"Eh?"
"Eh?...Ah!?"

Mashiro's eyes which had been drowsy just earlier snap awake.

Only then did Neneko realize that Mashiro's words were completely wholesome.

She imagined something naughty and even ended up giving her consent.

When Neneko's cheeks turn red with embarrassment, Mashiro grins like a mischievous child.

"In that case, why don't we try clinging close to each other and moving slowly?"

Just imagining it makes Neneko's cheeks heat up so she hides her face with a nearby towel.

However, her cat ears and tail betray her by coming out so Mashiro can clearly see how she's trembling in embarrassment.

When Mashiro touches the tip of her tail, Neneko gulps in anticipation.

Feeling Mashiro's fingers slowly slide towards the base, Neneko's heartbeat accelerates.

"Neneko, you like it when we do it slowly, don't you?"
"...That's not true..."
"Last time you wanted it so much that there were tears in your eyes."

When Mashiro's fingers reach the base of her tail, Neneko timidly looks up from the towel.

Unless she admits it, Mashiro won't make her feel good.

"...Meanie."
"It's fine, isn't it? I want to hear you say it, Neneko."

As Neneko's eyes wander due to embarrassment, Mashiro puts her hands on her cheeks.
Her face is so close that their lips would touch at the slightest movement.

"I'll make you feel good if you tell me."
"...Really?"
"Really."
"...I-if it's Mashiro-san... I'm fine with however we do it."

Neneko tries to hold back her embarrassment as she confesses. Then, Mashiro excitedly presses her lips against Neneko's.

As they exchange a deep kiss while their tongues entwine, Mashiro grabs the sensitive base of Neneko's tail.

Unable to resist the pleasure that courses through her body, Neneko lets out a moan.

She's so restless for more that it hurts as she gradually gets swallowed up by the whirlpool of pleasure. However, she'll be okay as long as Mashiro is by her side.
As long as she's together with Mashiro, she can accept this frustratingly pleasurable pain.

Even though their hair hasn't finished drying, they move to the bedroom to claim each other's bodies.

Smiling from the joy of being able to feel her lover's body on her own, Neneko accepts Mashiro's love.

Neneko wakes up early in the morning and revels in the joy of having her beloved girlfriend next to her.
Mashiro is sound asleep and completely at ease.

Neneko pinches her own cheeks and does indeed feel pain.
She breaks into a smile after confirming that she's not dreaming.

"...I love you."

Just saying those words makes her heart flutter even more.
Her feelings for Mashiro have only grown with each passing day and sometimes her chest would hurt from how much she loves her.

She closes her eyes and clings to Mashiro from the front.
With their bodies so close together, Neneko's body jumps when she suddenly feels a pain on her neck.

"...!"
"I love you too."
"W-when did you wake up!?"
"Just now."

Mashiro's hand makes its way behind Neneko and it begins fondling the area around her tailbone.

As Neneko bites down on her lip in frustration, Mashiro's hand goes under the hem of her clothes to touch her skin directly.

"We already did it a lot yesterday..."
"I just want to touch for a bit."
"Wi-will it really be just for a bit...?"

They made plans to go to the cafe near Mashiro's high school today.

The cafe is well known on social media for its cute atmosphere and Neneko had always wanted to try going there.

For the past few days, Neneko has been looking over the cafe's online menu in excitement, deciding what to order.

"The cafe has only 20 of their limited Mont Blanc Parfaits, so..."
"I know."
"...I'm worried since once you get started, Mashiro-san, there's no way you'll be satisfied with just a bit..."
"Don't you trust me?"

There's no way Neneko can say anything back when Mashiro stares at her with her sad eyes like that.

It's not like Neneko dislikes having sex.

"...It has to be only for a little bit."
"I understand."
"Nnngh...! Ah."

Her bra gets deftly removed and Neneko clings to Mashiro.

Neneko is too much of a pushover when it comes to Mashiro.
After all, she truly loves her and can't help finding her cute.

It makes Neneko want to indulge her and grant all her requests.
When Mashiro so lovingly seeks her body, Neneko wants to accept it.

While eating the fresh Shine Muscat Grape Parfait, Neneko glares at Mashiro who's sitting across from her.

Mashiro looks unusually uncomfortable as she tries to gauge Neneko's mood.

Of course, the seasonal Shine Muscat is also tasty, but her goal today was the limited Mont Blanc Parfait.

"I-I'm sorry..."
"My Mont Blanc Parfait..."
"It couldn't be helped. It's not like we could have just stopped in the middle of-"
"D-don't talk about that so loudly!"

Neneko panics and looks around, but no one else seems to be paying attention to their conversation.
She turns back to Mashiro while desperately trying to conceal her blushing cheeks.

Naturally, the two of them took a while in the morning to finish making love. By the time they got to the cafe, there were no more Mont Blanc Parfaits left.

"Let's come here again, okay? We'll be first in line and definitely eat the Mont Blanc Parfait."

Hearing that slightly warms up Neneko's heart.
Now that the two of them are lovers, they can come here together anytime one of them invites the other.

They don't need to think up a reason or some roundabout excuse.
As lovers, they can go on as many dates as they want.

"...Promise?"
"Of course. Is there anything else you would like to eat?"

Mashiro carefully shows her the menu.
For some reason, Neneko feels happy seeing Mashiro try to get back on her good side.

Even though it's a given that Mashiro doesn't want Neneko to hate her, it still warms her heart.

"I want to try the berry tart."
"We'll order that."
"...Also, I want us to hold hands on the way home."

Her small voice as she bashfully says that seems to reach Mashiro properly.

Seeing the slight surprise on Mashiro's face, Neneko follows up.

"I might feel better if you take a bath with me in addition to all of that."

Mashiro's ears gradually turn red and she covers her face with both hands out of embarrassment.

She looks extremely cute when she's embarrassed and Neneko finds it endearing.

As her lover, Neneko looks forward to the future where she gets to see even more of the various faces of this girl who's usually so cool.

As promised, the two walk home hand in hand.

Since they purchased some ingredients for dinner along the way, their other hands are holding shopping bags.

As they leisurely walk forward, Mashiro comes to a stop in front of a store.

"Travelling, huh...?"

There are several travel pamphlets displayed at the storefront introducing destinations for autumn.

"That sounds nice."
"Do you want to go?"

A trip with the person she loves will definitely be fun.
When Neneko nods several times, Mashiro smiles softly at her.

"But I'll be in school for a while..."
"How about during winter break?"
"Don't you want to go a bit earlier than that?"

Unlike Neneko who attends high school virtually, Mashiro has to worry about time constraints.
However, both of them want to enjoy this opportunity as soon as possible.

"We might be able to go if it's just an overnight trip... Would you prefer going to an onsen or camping?"

Either way, it's sure to be fun as long as Neneko is together with Mashiro.

Since she gets to choose, Neneko thinks about it for a bit and chooses the latter.

"Let's go camping."
"Alright, let's go glamping then. My friend posted about a really beautiful place for that on social media. Here, have a look..."

Mashiro takes out her smartphone and navigates to her friend's post.

In addition to being able to borrow outdoor barbecue sets, the location also provides many other amenities. It seems the only thing they really need to bring is a change of clothes.

Mashiro talks about how pretty the dome tents are when they're lit up at night. She seems to be looking forward to this just as much as Neneko.

Their two hearts beat as one over the excitement of going on a trip with the one they love.

The two were on the highway for an hour.
The scenery from the shuttle bus became more and more natural. By the time the bus left the main road, there was not a single tall building to be found.

When they arrived at the campsite and got off the bus, they felt the clean air against their skin.
The temperature here is lower than in the city and it's going to become even colder at night.

After they finish checking in, they head to their designated tent. Their tent comes with so many things that it's hard to think they're even camping.

Not only do they have a bed as to be expected when glamping, but there's also air conditioning. The standing lamps, rugs, and other furniture adorn the stylish interior.

"Amazing..."

Glamping feels completely different from when Neneko went camping with her family back when she was little. She can't help getting excited.

In addition to the double bed, there's even a mini sofa and table inside, making this feel more like being in a hotel than camping.

"We'll be having barbecue for dinner, right?"
"That's right. We'll use the grill next to the tent and it seems every group gets provided their own food."

There is also a hotel nearby and an onsen that glamping guests can also use. They have everything they can ever want. This is quite luxurious.

After placing her luggage in the corner, Mashiro exclaims in excitement.

"I want to go to the onsen!"
"Let's go right away."
"My shoulders have gotten stiff from sitting for so long."

The two head for the onsen and find no one else there since it's still only 3:00 p.m.
Neneko soaks in the tub together with Mashiro. It feels like they have this place reserved all for themselves.

She's still embarrassed to expose her body while it's well-lit, but she's gotten a bit more used to it compared to before.
Even so, she can't completely shake off the feeling of shame. Whenever Mashiro's naked body enters her vision, she feels her heart beating faster.

"This feels great..."

Shortly after closing her eyes, Neneko feels a finger on her neck.
Her eyes immediately snap open. While covering her mouth with her hands, she looks at Mashiro in protest.

"Ngh...What are you thinking? In a place like this..."

Neneko hardens her heart to get angry, but Mashiro just looks at her blankly.
Even though Neneko doesn't dislike making love, doing that in a public space is a huge breach of etiquette.

Despite Neneko reprimanding her, Mashiro just smiles in amusement.

"Why are you smiling...?"
"Even I'm not bold enough to do anything naughty in a public space."
"Then why...?"
"It's become full of bloodsucking marks."

Just as she pointed out, Neneko's neck has become full of bloodsucking marks since Mashiro sucks on it for every meal.

They will fade over time, but since she always gets a new one before the old ones fade away, there's no sign they'll disappear completely.

"...They're like proof that you're mine, so I couldn't help enjoying the sense of superiority."
"Then... please let me put my proof on you as well."
"Right here?"
"...When night comes."

Since Neneko doesn't know if the dome tent is soundproof, the two of them can't be too loud. That might be extremely frustrating, but she'll be able to endure if she's with Mashiro.

She's not a child anymore. She won't get flustered just from seeing the naked body of the person she loves.
Neneko has become so much of an adult that she secretly rubs her thighs together in anticipation of nighttime.

There are almost no streetlights here compared to the city, so the night sky is filled with countless stars.
After filling her stomach with barbecue, Neneko lies down with Mashiro on the rug they brought out in front of the dome tent.

It's cold under the autumn night sky, so the two of them are sharing one blanket.

Thanks to the light coming from inside the tent, even two women can feel safe when relaxing.

"The barbecue was delicious."
"...We also had that barbecue with onee-chan and the others. Even though it happened only this summer, it feels so nostalgic."
"We had a lot of problems to deal with back then."

The two turn their bodies sideways to look at each other.
With the light illuminating her face, Mashiro's eyes seem to sparkle more than usual.

She extends her hand out to touch Neneko's neck.

"...I've left a lot of bloodsucking marks on here... Aren't you worried about other people seeing them?"

Her eyes look slightly anxious. Although she's trying her best to face forward and has been doing well, she might still not have shaken off her anxiety completely.

"Didn't you say you were happy because they're proof that I'm yours, Mashiro-san?"
"...You really are kind, Neneko... so much that it scares me. How can you accept me so much?"

Her eyes waver with anxiety.
Neneko holds her hands tightly and smiles to assure her.

"Because I love you. Since my beloved Mashiro-san praised me... I was able to accept myself. I'm simply returning the favor."

Neneko brings her face closer and gives Mashiro a simple kiss.
Her lips are extremely moist, probably because she just applied lip balm.

"I'm glad that you're a vampire, Mashiro-san."
"...Eh?"
"Thanks to you being a vampire... I was able to form a bloodsucking partnership with you and the distance between us shortened... and now we're dating."

Neneko gently wipes Mashiro's eyes which have become wet with tears.
Mashiro may appear mature and stronger than anyone else, but she's actually sensitive and easily frightened...

Neneko wants to continue whispering words of love to her until she feels reassured.

"Besides...my blood is delicious, isn't it?"
"It is... It's so sweet that it's in a completely different league from blood packs..."
"I'm glad... that my blood is helping you live, Mashiro-san. What can make me happier than getting to support the person I love?"

Neneko raises her body and places Mashiro's head on her lap.
She combs her hair as if to comfort a small child.

"Please allow me to indulge you plenty until you feel reassured, Mashiro-san... Because I accept all of you."

Neneko raises her head to look up at the autumn night sky.
After all, Mashiro wouldn't want to be seen crying and sobbing.

Mashiro muffles her voice and seems to be having a hard time. Even so, she's trying her best to face forward.
Neneko continues to stroke her hair without saying anything, hoping that it helps soothe her deep wounds even if it's only a little.

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After drinking the hot cocoa, Neneko catches her breath.
When she was little, she often asked her sister to make this for her using cocoa powder.

She wasn't allowed in the kitchen back then, so she secretly asked her sister to make hot cocoa for her behind her mother's back.

"It's delicious."
"Well, I have gotten the hang of this."

Even now that she's 16, her sister still makes cocoa for her.
No matter how old she gets, to Neneka, Neneko will always be her baby sister.

She came to her family's house to pick up her winter clothes, but of course, she wasn't allowed to go straight home. After being detained, she's now drinking cocoa together with her sister.

"How are things with Mashiro? Are you two doing well?"
"Of course."
"You two went glamping the other day, right? It seems nice. Makes me want to go with Kouta."
"So you heard about that?"
"Mashiro showed us a lot of photos."
"Mashiro-san did that?"

When Mashiro is in that group of six, she's always cool and doesn't let her emotions show on her face.

At the very least, back then she certainly wasn't the type to freely offer details of a date.

"You know, in our group of six, Karen, Kei, and I were always the rowdier ones... while Yuu and Aoi kept us in check. Mashiro was always cool and kept to herself."
"Mm."
"She didn't smile much and always seemed to be staring off into the distance. We got along, but I don't think she ever truly opened her heart to us..."
"I see..."
"People said that she's difficult to approach because she's beautiful. I never really saw her talking to anyone else in class except us... She was a really quiet girl. But Mashiro has become different lately."

Her older sister's voice which sounded a little down as she stared into the distance gradually became more cheerful.
The smile on her face now seems to be one of relief.

"Whenever she talks about you, Neneko, her cheeks turn red and she smiles happily... she has never missed an opportunity to speak fondly of you, you know?"
"....Eh?"
"The atmosphere around her has become softer and brighter than before. The one who changed Mashiro was you, Neneko."

Neneko is surprised to hear that Mashiro is always talking about her and she gets embarrassed hearing all of that from her sister. Suddenly, she becomes self-conscious.
Just as Neneko was saved by her, she wanted to help Mashiro face forward to her as well.

Did staying by her side and being there for her cause something to change within Mashiro?

"Do I really have that kind of power...?"
"Just as Mashiro has changed you, you've also changed Mashiro. The power of the person you love truly is amazing♪"

While holding the cup of cocoa in both hands, Neneko shifts her gaze to the tips of her toes.
She's unable to hold back her grin and her joy is obvious at a glance.

"So, does Mashiro have any other faces that only you know, Neneko?"

When her sister looks at her with eyes filled with curiosity, Neneko gently puts her index finger to her lips.
Feeling like a mischievous child, she simply answers, "That's a secret."

Mashiro's flustered expression and the childish side she shows occasionally...
Only Neneko, her lover, has the privilege of seeing all that.

Right now, Neneko wants to keep those faces Mashiro only shows her lover to herself.
She won't be divulging those secrets so easily, not even to her beloved older sister.

Neneko returns home carrying a paper bag in each hand and gets greeted by Mashiro, who has just finished vacuuming.

Only Neneko knows this sight of Mashiro in a red apron.

Mashiro said that she isn't very good at housework, but recently she has been proactively trying to help out.

"Welcome back. That's a lot of stuff."
"I went to get my winter clothes..."

As Neneko sits down at the doorway to take off her shoes, Mashiro hugs her from behind.
Mashiro's long hair tickles Neneko's cheeks.

"What's wrong?"
"...I'm hungry."
"Okay. Let me wash my hands first."

After nodding, Mashiro follows Neneko into the washroom.
The way she's waiting and staring as Neneko washes her hands is like a well-behaved dog. It's so cute that Neneko can't help but smile.

When they move to the bedroom, Mashiro immediately pushes her down on the bed.
Every time Mashiro gets on top of her and sucks her blood, Neneko's heart beats faster.

She can't get enough of the sight of Mashiro enjoying her blood and the sound of her deep breaths that sometimes leak out.

"...Mmm, so sweet."

Neneko wants her to become so obsessed that she won't be able to live without Neneko's blood.
She doesn't want Mashiro to ever taste anyone else's blood again. She wants Mashiro's life to be connected to her own.

"...Can I do it?"

When Neneko nods, Mashiro gently places her hands on Neneko's chest.
Neneko unconsciously lets out a moan as her soft bosoms get squeezed.

When Mashiro presses her lips against Neneko's, Neneko tastes her own blood.
Mashiro said it was sweet, but since Neneko is a catkin, it tastes only metallic to her.

Whether it's the unique taste of this kiss or the way Mashiro looks at Neneko with eyes that burn with passion, Neneko doesn't want anyone else to know these. Neneko definitely does not want to give up these rights as Mashiro's lover to anyone.

Neneko has never thought herself to be the possessive type, but she thinks such things when it comes to Mashiro.

Inside the shopping basket is the replacement for Neneko's favorite shampoo and conditioner.
There are also other daily necessities inside such as paper towels.

Using the shopping memo on her smartphone, Neneko goes around the store adding one item after another from her list to her basket.
The nearby drugstore has two floors and so many products that Neneko always ends up buying more than she planned every time she comes here.

Even though she has no plans to buy any today, she stops at the lip makeup section of the store.

"This new lipstick might be nice..."

She still has some left of the one she's currently using, but this newly released maple-scented lipstick intrigues her.

Thinking about whether she should add it to her shopping basket or not, the product next to the lipstick catches her eye and she picks it up.

"...What's this?"

The product is labeled as a lip scrub, and it seems to remove dead skin cells. The phrase, "Get scrumptious lips!" in the product explanation grabs her attention.

The slogan is "It will make your lips smooth".
When she looks it up on her smartphone, she finds rather favorable reviews online. For a while, this was in such high demand that the stores were out of stock.

"..."

After nonchalantly putting it in her shopping basket, Neneko hurries to the cash register. She certainly didn't have any ulterior motives.

She's not thinking about wanting Mashiro to think that her lips are soft when they kiss. She's doing this purely to care for her own body.

While wondering who exactly she's making these excuses for, she pays for her purchases and bags them in the midst of her internal comedy act.

Before going to bed, she stands in front of the washroom mirror to apply her newly purchased lip scrub.
It's somewhat rough with a faint sweet scent.

"It's like candy..."

She feels the urge to lick it but resists since she already brushed her teeth.
Neneko focuses on putting the lip scrub in her lip lines, but since it's her first using this, she's not sure how much to apply.

"Is this amount good...?"

There's a saying that goes, "Better too big than too small", so perhaps putting more on will have a greater effect.
After thinking about it, she ends up applying more lip scrub than she would normally apply lip balm.

Once she finishes all her other preparations, she heads to the bedroom where her lover is already lying on the bed.
When Neneko lies down next to her, her body gets gently embraced.

"...Do you smell something sweet?"
"M-maybe it's just your imagination."

She's embarrassed about applying lip scrub so she decides to keep quiet about it.

Mashiro probably knows all about lip scrubs given how fashion-conscious she is. It will be awfully embarrassing if she gets the wrong idea and thinks that Neneko applied it for the sake of kissing her.

When she returns to consciousness, Neneko gets an uncomfortable feeling on her lips.
It hurts slightly. When she uses her fingers to check, she finds no bleeding.

Mashiro also wakes up at the same time, so Neneko worriedly asks her to check.

"Um, Mashiro-san..."
"Hm...?"
"Is there anything weird about my mouth?"

After rubbing her eyes, Mashiro carefully inspects Neneko's lips.

"It looks like it usually does."
"There's no peeling or reddening...?"
"Not at all. It looks the same as always."

When Neneko goes to the washroom mirror, it's just as Mashiro says.
Neneko looks the same as always.
The pain isn't too serious, but this slight tingling sensation is definitely due to the lip scrub she applied yesterday.

After finishing breakfast, the two of them watch TV together. Neneko can not get her lips off her mind and ends up touching them with her fingers.

"Do your lips hurt?"
"Just a little..."
"Do you have any allergies?"

When she shakes her head, Mashiro frowns in concern.

"Want to go to the hospital?"
"I don't think it's that serious."
"But I'm going to worry if you're hurting."
"...Th-they're probably just overstimulated... I think they'll heal on their own after some time."
"What do you mean?"

The slight drop in Mashiro's tone makes Neneko's shoulders jump.
She's definitely misunderstanding something.

Did Mashiro suspect something bad to be the cause of her lips feeling strange?

Neneko tries to think of an excuse, but it's only at times like this that she can't find the right words.

"Well, that's..."
"...We didn't kiss that much yesterday... did you kiss someone else?"
"There's no way I did that!"
"Then why?"

Should she cause her lover to worry?
Should she embarrass herself by confessing?

There's no need to even think twice about which one to choose if she considers Mashiro's feelings.

"...I tried using a lip scrub, but I think I applied too much..."
"Oh, so that was it... You should have just said so sooner."
"But it's embarrassing..."

Mashiro tilts her head in confusion.

"Why would that be embarrassing?"
"...!"
"Ah! Did you want to take care of your lips for my sake and didn't want me to know?"

Neneko realizes she dug her own grave by saying that.

She didn't need to say anything more than the fact that she applied too much lip scrub, but because of her ulterior motives, she ended up saying something strange.

Due to that mistake, Mashiro got clued in on her indecent thinking process.

"Because... I wanted you to think it feels good when we kiss... so it's embarrassing."

When she lowers her head in embarrassment, Mashiro hugs her.
Neneko could hear the pounding of Mashiro's heart from her bulging chest.

Mashiro's heart is beating just as fast as Neneko's.

"My heart has become like this because you're so cute, Neneko."
"Mashiro-san..."

When Mashiro brings her face closer, Neneko closes her eyes. Anticipating a kiss, she's surprised when Mashiro only licks her lips with her tongue.

"...!"
"We should probably avoid stimulating your lips too much."
"Then... we can't kiss until they're healed?"

Neneko couldn't hide her shock. How long will she be forced to wait? They have been kissing almost every day and she hates the idea of being unable to do that for even a single day.

"Do you know what a lizard kiss is?"
"No. What's that?"
"Stick your tongue out."

When Neneko nervously sticks out her tongue, Mashiro does the same and their tongues touch.

"!?"

The moment the tips of their tongues come into contact, Neneko immediately pulls back from shock.

"It's a kiss where only our tongues touch and not our lips."
"I-isn't this more embarrassing than a regular kiss...?"
"Then are you fine with not being able to kiss?"
"But...it's embarrassing..."
"I want to do it though. Don't you want to as well?"

If Mashiro asks her like that, there's no way Neneko can refuse her. Even Neneko really wants to kiss.

She slowly sticks out her tongue and the tips of their tongues touch just like before.
When she shuts her eyes and extends her tongue even further, it gets enveloped in warmth.

With each of Mashiro's naughty movements, the bottom of Neneko's tongue tickles. Neneko lets out muffled moans of frustration and irritation.

"Mmmn... nngh...."

Since her mouth is open, saliva leaks down her lip.
When Neneko finds the courage to move her tongue as well, Mashiro's movements become more intense.

This feels good, but Neneko still wants to press her lips against Mashiro's. That way, she'll be able to feel Mashiro's heat and more importantly, they'll be closer together.

"...Nngh... ugh...."

Mashiro licks up some of the saliva that spills out of Neneko and stares at her with a passionate gaze.
She gently pushes Neneko down to the carpet and Neneko clings to her like a spoiled child.

"...Mashiro-san... I prefer the usual kisses..."
"Did that not feel good?"
"It did, but... it's embarrassing and... I get to be closer to you during our usual kisses, so..."

Even after she pleads with Mashiro to kiss her normally, Mashiro shakes her head.

"Endure until your lips are healed, okay?"
"But..."

This person truly is kind. She's thinking about Neneko above everything else.

Right now, she must be fighting the urge to kiss Neneko passionately to prevent her lips from getting any worse.

Mashiro raises Neneko's leg and begins licking her thigh.
Neneko's heart pounds with anticipation as the tip of Mashiro's tongue approaches her sensitive spot.

Despite the pleasure of having her body stimulated like this, it feels lacking without a kiss.

Of course, Neneko loves it when their bodies rub against one another, but she loves the deep kisses that allow her to intimately feel Mashiro's heat more than anything.

When she wakes up the next morning, the tingling on her lips has completely disappeared. She lets out a sigh of relief finding out that was only temporary.

After holding back for so long, she definitely wants to feel Mashiro's lips on her own today.
She goes to the kitchen to prepare breakfast. Mashiro stands next to her in the kitchen, drinking milk.

"Ah, by the way. I tried that lip scrub and it's quite good."
"Really?"

When Neneko turns her face towards Mashiro, she feels soft pillowy lips on her own.
Delight rises from the bottom of her heart from this sensation that she had been craving for yesterday.

"So, what do you think?"

Looks like there's no problem with the product if used properly.
Neneko gets embarrassed all over again at her mess up.

"...That isn't enough."

When she avoids Mashiro's eyes to act like a spoiled child, Mashiro's lips descend on hers once more.
A wave of pleasure assaults her as Mashiro inserts her tongue between her lips.

She wraps her arms around Mashiro's back, drowning in this deep kiss. At the mercy of the movements of Mashiro's tongue, Neneko's heart steadily beats faster.

With her long hair tied back, Mashiro wears a plain navy dress.

She has a more subdued atmosphere compared to usual.
As Neneko admires how pretty she looks, she notices her pale complexion.
She seems nervous and has been fidgeting restlessly since earlier.

"Are you going somewhere?"
"...I'm going to pay respects to my mom."
"By yourself?"

She slowly nods her head.
She's wearing pale pink lipstick instead of her usual red one, which might be why she looks slightly more ephemeral.

"...My father won't be coming... and I have no idea what my grandparents are doing or even where they are."

Neneko takes Mashiro's hand and gently intertwines their fingers.
Since her eyes look so anxious, Neneko wants to reassure her.

"...Can I go with you?"
"Eh...?"
"I'd like to visit your mother as well, Mashiro-san."
"...Thank you."

Neneko quickly changes into a pale beige blouse and a black long skirt.
The two of them buy chrysanthemums at a nearby florist's before getting on the train.

About 30 minutes later, they arrive at one of the main train stations in Tokyo. This area is lined with shopping malls and recreational facilities.
Neneko never knew there was a cemetery here.

Still a bit confused, she follows Mashrio before they come to a stop at a splendid luxurious-looking building.

"Here...?"
"This is an apartment-style mausoleum. A lot of people's remains are stored inside..."

It seems that the ashes are stored securely deeper inside and there's an automatic transport system that brings them out for visitors.

The gravesites of the members of the Nekonoyama family, including Neneko's mother, are located in a cemetery in the suburbs, so this is quite different from what Neneko is used to.

There's a beautiful entrance that's like a hotel's. Mashiro takes out a smart card from her bag and holds it to the card reader.

"It's the second space from the right. Let's go."

Mashiro takes Neneko's hand and they walk in together.
The automatic transport system carries the ashes to the designated location.

After offering the chrysanthemums they had purchased, the two burn incense and place their hands together.

"Today, I brought my lover with me."

Mashiro's voice as she speaks to her mother is incredibly gentle.
Her mother must have been an incredibly intelligent and wonderful woman, just like Mashiro.

At the same time, she might have been the only support for Mashiro back when she was little.

"...She's cute, isn't she? Not only that, she's kind, good at cooking, and makes portions for me during meals... even though I don't need to eat since I'm a vampire..."

Little by little, her voice begins to tremble.
Affected by the mood, Neneko feels a slight irritation in her eyes as tears begin to form.

"...She even made me a bento for the athletics festival... and it was really delicious. When I suck her blood, she never seems repulsed and even said it made her happy, you know?"

Her stepmother never took kindly to her being a vampire and has always treated her badly.

She never made any meals for Mashiro since a vampire only needs blood to survive and has never brought her any bentos for athletic festivals.

As that horrible treatment continued, Mashiro could no longer accept herself being a vampire.

"Right now, I'm happy... The days when you were gone, mom, it was difficult to live and breathe, but... I'm enjoying life now and can't wait for tomorrow. Just thinking about how I'll spend tomorrow with Neneko gets my heart racing."

Unable to contain them anymore, Neneko lets her tears fall.
Even though she wanted to stand proudly in front of her lover's mother.

"Thank you for giving birth to me as a vampire... Without that, I wouldn't be together with Neneko right now. I'm no longer alone... so you don't need to worry about me anymore."

After rubbing her eyes, Neneko squeezes Mashiro's hand.
When she looks over, she sees that Mashiro is crying just like her.

"I'm Nekonoyama Neneko. Thank you for giving me the chance to date Mashiro-san..."

Mashiro gently smiles and wipes Neneko's tears, which are still falling down despite Neneko wiping them earlier. However, Mashiro is crying as well. Both their tears are endlessly falling.

"I'll make sure Mashiro-san never experiences any sadness again. No matter what happens, I will protect her... I will definitely... make Mashiro-san happy from the bottom of her heart... and be happy together with her."

As she bows deeply, she hears Mashiro from above her.

"...Thank you, Neneko."

How many emotions are packed into those few words?
It has been a long road and it wasn't easy getting here.

She suffered and struggled a lot.
There were times when she couldn't accept herself, but now the two of them are smiling at each other.

These tears the two of them are shedding are not tears of sadness.
They're warm tears filled with joy after obtaining the happiness they had yearned for so long.

On their way home as the sun sets, the two hold hands as they walk.
As Neneko reflects on these feelings of love, Mashiro begins speaking.

"Sometimes... I get scared when I'm with you, Neneko. I think I might be too happy right now... When I think back to the days when you weren't with me, I can't believe I was able to endure them."
"I'll be with you forever from now on, so I won't let you suffer ever again."
"That's my line."

Both of their eyes are red and swollen from crying so much.
Even with her face not as cute as usual, Mashiro stares at Neneko with an extremely loving look.

If they're truly in love, they'll be able to accept each other no matter how they look.

The two of them smile at each other and savor the happiness of simply being at each other's side.

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Neneko has recently taken a liking to the Chesterfield coat she bought this year since it's tight around the waist and accentuates her figure beautifully.

Wearing the coat over her floral dress, she's on the way home from a date with Mashiro when she happens to bump into her friend.

"Lulu-chan!"
"Ah! Neneko-onee-chan!"

Since children love skinship, Lulu happily hugs Neneko.

Despite knowing that she's a child, Mashiro has a complicated expression on her face since Lulu looks like an adult. To Neneko's surprise, Mashiro is quite possessive and prone to jealousy.

"Neneko-onee-chan, you look cute and stylish. Were you two on a date?"
"That's right. Where are you going, Lulu-chan?"
"I'm going to Witch-san's place right now!"

Lulu happily waves them goodbye before running off.

"Witch-san is..."
"I've briefly mentioned her before. She's the one who can see memories using a crystal ball... She was the one who showed me what happened when I went into heat."
"I see... that's amazing, being able to see people's memories like that..."

The two hold hands again and slowly walk home.

Unlike Neneko who can only wear block heels, Mashiro can wear stilettos

without any issue. Mashiro's heels click against the ground as she elegantly walks. Neneko looks admiringly at Mashiro today as well.

After returning home, Neneko and Mashiro casually enter the bathtub together.
Neneko's eyes narrow in comfort as she gets hugged from behind.

"...How far back into the past can that witch see?"
"I'm not sure... but she never mentioned there being any limits last time."
"Um..."

Hearing the nervousness in Mashiro's voice, Neneko worriedly turns around.
Just as she expected, Mashiro's complexion looks a little pale.

"Do you think I can meet that person...?"
"Eh?"
"...My father's wife. I want to see the past... of my current mother."

Neneko gets confused by this sudden request.
She worries that seeing the past of the woman who treated Mashiro so badly will cause her further distress.

"...I want to know... why she treated me like that..."
"Why don't we try paying her a visit tomorrow?"

Seeing Mashiro nod so strongly, Neneko realizes that she had wanted Mashiro to dismiss the idea.
After Mashiro has gotten hurt and gone through so much, Neneko is afraid of Mashiro deepening her wounds. Neneko does not want to see her beloved hurting and crying any more than she already has.

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Holding a box of cakes, Neneko presses the intercom of the detached house surrounded by a rose garden.
When the witch comes out to greet them, she seems only slightly surprised to see Neneko and Mashiro.

They get invited into the room with all the antique furniture and get served rosehip tea.

The witch is sitting on the sofa at the other side of the table and has taken out a crystal ball just like before.
Even though they haven't said it yet, she seems to have figured out why they're here.

"So, whose memory should I look at today...?"
"This person's."

Mashiro takes out a photo from her bag.
The photo is of a very beautiful woman. Though she looks to be in her late thirties, she's actually a little older.

With her elegant smile, she seems to be a kind woman. She certainly didn't give off the impression of someone who would abuse a vampire child.

"...How far back?"
"Eleven years ago... in May? Wait, I think it was October...?"
"...I can only show you the past as it happened. Are you okay with that?"
"...Yes."

When the witch places her hands over the crystal ball, the clear crystal ball turns cloudy.
Then, the image of the woman when she was younger emerges.

She looks nervous as she talks to another woman.

"I wonder if I can become a good mother for Mashiro-chan..."
"It will be okay. You've always wanted kids, didn't you?"
"Yes... I was at a loss at first, but she has half of that person's blood. I'm sure we'll be able to become a wonderful family..."

The woman's eyes seem to be sparkling with hope.

"...If my body could bear a child, would that person still have fallen for another woman?"
"To add onto that, the one he had an affair with was a vampire, right?"
"Vampires need blood to live... so it seems many rely on rich people to take care of them. Blood packs are only provided up to the age of 16, right? It's too expensive to buy at the store... Vampires who have no partner and no money... have no other choice but to live like that."

Hearing that, Mashiro leans over the table and grabs the witch's hand.
Since her hand has left the crystal ball, the image immediately cuts off.

It was only two years ago that the law was revised to distribute blood packs to any vampires that wanted them.

Before then, vampires were desperate to find a partner before their supply of blood packs got cut off once they reached the age of 16. Additionally, the system that matches human volunteers to vampires seems to have only started about 10 years ago.

"What's wrong?"
"...I've seen enough."
"...Are you sure?"
"...I already understand now... so that's enough."

Mashiro's stepmother is definitely not some fiendish person.
She must have had complicated feelings that she desperately tried to face.

"I'm sorry, Witch-san."
"Don't be... Of course, it's important to look back at the past. However, the most important thing is what happens from now on."

Taking out a lace handkerchief, the witch begins polishing her crystal ball.

"You can't change the past, but you can change the future as much as you want. There's no need to look at or remember a past so painful that it makes your face pale."

The two bow deeply to the witch and offer her the box of cakes they brought.
Mashiro only drank half of her rosehip tea.

Either she didn't like it or she wasn't in the mood to drink anything.
Neneko isn't sure what to say to her on the way home.

"I'm sorry that you had to accompany me for that today."
"You don't need to apologize... why did you want to see that person's past?"
"...I was wondering how she felt. Her husband brought a daughter born from his infidelity and made her raise that daughter. It's strange... even though I held such a deep grudge against that person... Now I feel a bit of pity towards her."

When Mashiro said that, her eyes didn't hold the faintest trace of doubt.
As if she had finally overcome something, she looks straight ahead.

"Now that I think back, she looked like she was about to cry as she said all those cruel things to me..."

Mashiro must be beginning to come to terms with that person.
She wants to forget the grudge that she has built up over so many years.
Little by little, she's beginning to forget.

"I'm... tired of holding grudges."
"Mashiro-san..."
"The more I detest that person, the more trapped I feel..."
"..."
"I want to forget all of that... and make a lot of happy memories with you, Neneko. It might be important to face your past, but as long as you're with me, Neneko..."

"Then I don't need anything else," Mashiro continues.
She goes on to say that she has no need for hate now that she has someone she cherishes.

"...I used to hate myself for being a vampire so much, but... since you accept that part of me, Neneko, I don't find that so bad."

Neneko stands up on her toes and kisses Mashiro on the lips.
This should be the best way for her to convey her feelings.

"Me too... I hated myself for being a catkin. Because of my appearance that stands out, my cat ears, and tail... but, since you told me I was cute, Mashiro-san, I started to like myself."

The two hold each other hands and gently squeeze.

"It's all thanks to you."

Mashiro pulls Neneko's body in closer and the two hug as the orange glow of the setting sun pours down on the streets.

They've both been hurt and suffered a lot. That's why they can understand each other's feelings. They can lick each other's wounds and be there for each other.
Neneko feels glad to have Mashiro at her side. She's glad to have fallen in love with her. The joy of being able to think that makes her heart tremble.

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A bundle of magazines is gathered in the hallway before the front door.
Tomorrow is recyclable garbage day, so Mashiro must have collected all these to throw away.

The strings are coming apart since it was tied a bit too loosely.
If Neneko leaves it like this, it will eventually fall apart. She bends down slightly to fasten it.

"Huh...?"

At the very top, she sees the picture book about the princess.
This is the story of the princess who suffered under the torment of her wicked stepmother.

Neneko isn't sure if it's truly okay to throw away this book that has so many tearstains in it.

"What's wrong?"
"Are you really planning to throw all these away tomorrow?"
"That's right."
"Are you sure you want to throw away this picture book...?"

Mashiro responds to Neneko's confusion with a bright smile.

"Well, I haven't read that in years... I've said it before, right? When I was little, I always admired the princess in the story..."

She squats down to the same height as Neneko and gently strokes the cover of the picture book.

She has a fond expression on her face but she doesn't have the slightest hint of reluctance.

"...But I don't need it anymore. Because I have you, Neneko."

Mashiro smiles from the bottom of her heart and Neneko ends up smiling as well.

"Do you have dreams of becoming anything else besides a princess?"
"Hmm... I wonder. What do you think I should be, Neneko?"
"You can be anything. As long as we're together."

The two of them look at each other and laugh.

Neither of them are princesses, so there's no prince that will save them when they're in a pinch.

There isn't even a hero of justice to rescue them, but now Neneko thinks they don't need such things.

When she gets anxious, Mashiro will be next to her.
That goes for tough and bitter times as well.

As long as she has Mashiro, who understands her feelings better than anyone else and supports her, by her side then that's already enough.

A vampire and a catkin.

They may never have the leading roles in a story, but thanks to each other's support, they have the strength to achieve happiness no matter what comes their way.

Neither Neneko nor Mashiro are so weak that they can't survive without someone rescuing them.

Being princesses that wait for their happiness doesn't suit their personalities.

If either of them is about to fall, then they just need to take the other's hand.

As long as they keep doing that, then there's nothing to be afraid of.

They'll become who they've always wanted to be.
They'll become the ideal version of themselves they've always admired.

Doing that alone is scary, but if they're together, they'll be able to become anything.

Character Introductions

Nekonoyama Neneko

Age: 16 / Height: 158 cm

A female catkin who can speak to cats and transform into one. Due to her appearance, she's afraid of interacting wtih others so she attends school virtually. She's bad at sports, but since she has been helping out at home since she was young, she's good at housework.

Tachino Mashiro

Age: 18 / Height: 161 cm

A female vampire born between a human and vampire. After her birth mother died, she was raised by her stepmother, but the discrimination and abuse she faced made it hard for her to accept herself. That's why she has a cool and reserved personality. She's a jack of all trades that picks things up quickly.

Suishou Alice

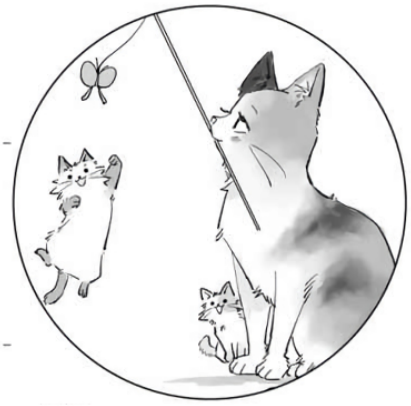
Age: 19 / Height: 152 cm

A demihuman like Neneko and the others. She can see the past of others using a crystal ball. Lulu fondly calls her a witch, but not wanting to hurt Lulu's innocence, she always lets her off with a light warning. Has a caring personality

Calico Cat

Age: 5 / Length: 26 cm

A calico cat who lives in the park close to Neneko's home. Has a kind and wise personality. Worries over Neneko, but the reason she does so is unknown.



Inui Lulu

Age: 12 / Height: 162 cm

A female dogkin who can speak to dogs and transform into one. Since her parents are always busy and she gets lonely, she enjoys going on walks in dog form and having people fawn over her. She has a cheery and direct personality, but she's a bit clumsy at communicating her feeling so she can get slightly reckless at times.

Afterword

Nice to meet you, I'm Hinohara. First of all, thank you for picking up "Nekonoyama Neneko Becomes a Neko" and reading this far.

I looked back at the books I owned as I wondered what I should write for an afterword... but in the end, I think it's best to write in my own words, so please excuse me for my inarticulate words.

When I first got the notification I received an award, I thought it was a scam. Although I thought it was a good idea to submit this story to the contest, I never expected to actually win anything... However, I wondered if it was indeed true. I wanted to continue dreaming even if I got fooled in the end.

Then it turns out I really did win an award and before I knew it, I was writing this afterword... This year, I just entered the workforce and things have been hectic for me in this unfamiliar environment. Before I knew it, I got a book published.

Ever since I was young, I have loved manga and novels. Even now, many of the works I read still remain in my heart. Some of those works tickle my curiosity and make me tremble with excitement while other works stir my soul to the point where I can feel my body heating up. It may be presumptuous of me, but I've continued writing stories with the hopes that one of my works will be able to gently remain in someone's heart the same way.

This is my first book published. As a novelist, I am still just a fledgling and have only reached my starting point, so to speak. Although I am still just a novice, I hope you will continue to watch over me warmly from now on.

Thank you, editor-sama, for finding me and gently guiding me. Thank you, Mito-sama, for all the cute illustrations. Thank you to all the designers, proofreaders, and print shops.

Also, thank you to all the Kakuyomu readers who have supported me through the screen. I was so happy to read all your kind words that I've reread them so many times I've pretty much memorized them.

Without everyone's support, I wouldn't have been able to do my best up to this point. I'll keep that kindness in my heart without forgetting modesty and continue to do my best. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to everyone involved in this book.

Last but not least, I would like to thank you for purchasing "Nekonoyama Neneko Becomes a Neko".

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Hinohara